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**A GUIDE TO  
PUBLIC OPINION POLLS**



# A GUIDE TO PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

By George Gallup

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1948

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TO EDWARD G. BENSON

*whose ability, objectivity, and pioneering zeal*

*did so much*

*to advance public opinion research*

*throughout the world*





# PREFACE

## TO THE REVISED EDITION

WHEN *A Guide to Public Opinion Polls* was first published in 1944, it was designed to answer, in non-technical language, the questions that people most frequently ask about public opinion polling. The present revised edition contains a number of new questions that have arisen during the last four years in the new and fast-growing science of opinion measurement. All questions from the previous edition that still seem pertinent have been retained, but the answers have in the majority of cases been expanded and fresh illustrations added.

This revised edition includes a full discussion and appraisal of the two major sampling methods now in general use—quota sampling and area sampling. It likewise includes a much-expanded discussion of question-wording techniques and of interviewing methods. The accuracy record of public opinion polls has been brought up to date. A new section on polling in foreign countries has been added.

The author's thanks are due to Dr. Alfred Max, codirector of the French Institute of Public Opinion, who first assembled the questions for the original edition of the guidebook and did much of the early work in preparing that edition. Those who have given valuable help in preparing this revised edition are William A. Lydgate, editor of the American Institute of Public Opinion; William S. Gillam, statistical director of the American Institute; Emery H. Ruby, who is in charge of interviewers, Lawrence E. Benson, the late Edward G. Benson, Lewis Bowen, Lita Scheel, and Kathleen Teggart.

GEORGE GALLUP

*Princeton, N.J.*  
*April, 1948*



## FOREWORD

IT is hoped that this book will provide readers with a better conception of methods employed in public opinion research and with a better understanding of the value of poll results to democratic governments.

Public opinion polls have been thoroughly tested in times of both peace and war. Virtually every important issue since 1935 which has come before the country has been covered in periodic surveys. The value of polls to democracy is written into the record of this era.

The reliability of methods now employed to gauge public opinion has been demonstrated time and again, not only in the United States but in a dozen different nations. Polls have met successfully the test which any scientific method must meet. They have proved equally reliable when applied in completely different circumstances and by different organizations.

Students of government have noted many contributions to our democratic process made by polls. Many of these will be discussed at length in the pages which follow. Suffice it here to review the ten which seem most important:

1. Public opinion polls have provided political leaders with a more accurate gauge of public opinion than they had prior to 1935.

No responsible person in the field of public opinion research would assert that polling methods are perfect. On the other hand, no one who has studied all the methods of gauging public opinion would maintain that other methods are superior to polling methods. Certainly the indices which were relied upon most in the past—letters, newspaper editorials, self-appointed experts, and the like—have been found to be highly inaccurate as guides to public opinion.

2. Public opinions polls have speeded up the processes of de-

mocracy by providing not only accurate, but swift, reports of public opinion.

Modern poll procedures make it possible to conduct a nationwide referendum or plebiscite in a matter of hours, and to report results that would differ by only a few percentage points from the results which would be obtained if the entire voting population of a nation went to the polls. In fact in many situations—particularly those in which a substantial portion of the population fails to take the trouble to vote—the poll results might be even more accurate as a measure of public sentiment than the official returns.

3. Public opinion polls have shown that the common people do make good decisions.

The arguments which have continued from the early days of the country regarding the political wisdom of the common people can now be settled on the basis of a mountain of factual data. The views of the people have been recorded on hundreds of issues and enough time has elapsed to judge the soundness of majority opinion on scores of these problems.

The people have displayed such good sense, and have made such a good record, that the faith of many persons in the basic premises of democracy has been rekindled. There is little disposition today to refer to the people in slighting terms, as was the case after the first World War, when it was common to think of the people as comprising a "boobocracy."

4. Public opinion polls have helped to focus attention on major issues of the day.

They have provided what Walter Lippmann, in his book *Public Opinion*, asserted was greatly needed by this democracy—a machinery for scoring. By injecting the element of controversy, by showing the division of opinion, in fact by helping to simplify major issues by expressing them in language understandable to the great mass of people, polls have helped to increase public interest in many national issues.

5. Public opinion polls have uncovered many "areas of ignorance."

In performing this service they have brought out certain fundamental weaknesses of our educational system and have pointed to the shortcomings of the whole process of keeping the public well-informed on vital issues of the day.

6. Public opinion polls have helped administrators of government departments make wiser decisions.

The problem of dealing intelligently with the public is one that confronts not only the heads of many government departments, but state and local officials everywhere. Government is learning what business learned years ago—that any program designed to influence the public must be based upon accurate knowledge of public attitudes. Millions of dollars can be wasted by following wrong hunches about the public's information and thinking on important policies.

7. Public opinion polls have made it more difficult for political bosses to pick presidential candidates "in smoke-filled rooms."

The "open" primary was originally intended to give voters a chance to help guide the parties in choosing presidential nominees and candidates for other political office. It was designed to strip political machines of their power to select candidates without respect to the wishes of the people.

Polls can perform this service which the open primary was intended to provide. They can report the popularity of various candidates with the voters. And in doing so they can make it that much more difficult for professional politicians to hand-pick candidates.

8. Public opinion polls have shown that the people are not motivated, in their voting, solely by the factor of self-interest, as many politicians have presumed.

Time after time, poll results reveal the fairness of the people in spreading the tax load to all segments of the population, their resentment at "log rolling" methods, and their concern about the

national good, as contrasted with the selfish interests of their own community or state. Too often, officeholders assume that the only road to popularity and to re-election is to grab as much political booty as possible for their own electorate—a fact disproved by poll results.

9. Public opinion polls constitute almost the only present check on the growing power of pressure groups.

Many students of government have been concerned with the great influence exerted upon legislation by lobbyists for the various pressure groups in the country. By exploding the claims of these lobbyists to represent the “unanimous” or “overwhelming” sentiment of the pressure group which employs them, public opinion polls have revealed their real status.

Poll results show that pressure-group spokesmen often represent only a minority of those within their own groups, and prove baseless their threats of political reprisal if legislators do not bow to their wishes.

10. Public opinion polls help define the “mandate” of the people in national elections.

Inevitably many wrong conclusions are drawn from the attempt to read the will of the people on national issues, by examining election returns on individuals. Some of the greatest mistakes of the last thirty years have come about by trying to decide what the public really thought on issues, when it cast its vote for candidates.

Not until elections are changed to permit the public to vote on all the issues which come up in a campaign will it be possible to draw accurate conclusions about the opinion of the majority on specific problems. Meanwhile public opinion polls can perform this service. At the same time that the views of voters are obtained on candidates, the views of these same voters can be recorded on issues. In this way, election results can be interpreted much more accurately than in the past.

Since this book has been designed as a guide to polls, and not

as a textbook, no attempt has been made to cover fully every phase of the problems of public opinion research. An effort has been made, however, to answer all the questions most frequently asked of polling organizations. Questions asked by teachers, journalists, party leaders, officeholders, and students of public opinion are stated, either in their original form, or as they are usually worded by those who seek information about polling practices.

Because there is overlapping in the questions, there is of necessity repetition in the answers.

Many persons have contributed to the development of this new field of research, and credit for present achievements must, therefore, be shared by many.

Hadley Cantril, director of the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton University, has conducted many valuable experimental studies on problems relating to the measurement of public opinion. His book, *Gauging Public Opinion*, should serve to guide researchers in this field for years to come.

Elmo Roper, director of the *Fortune* magazine polls, has pioneered the use of attitude scales in public opinion surveys. The accuracy of his forecasts in presidential elections has done much to establish the reliability of sampling procedures.

Dr. Rensis Likert, director of the University of Michigan survey division, has, more than anyone else, directed attention to the usefulness of intensive interviewing techniques and to the value of "open" questions in revealing public attitudes on issues of the day.

Through his advocacy of "panels," Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld has been instrumental in showing the value of this method in studying changes in public opinion. By reinterviewing the same persons periodically, Dr. Lazarsfeld has demonstrated how this procedure can shed light on the factors which cause people to change their views.



In his book, *Straw Votes*, Dr. Claude Robinson was one of the first to bring to public attention the problems, and possible solutions, involved in election forecasting. In dealing with public opinion problems of business and industry, he has helped to prove the usefulness to the business world of public opinion techniques.

Although the subject of political geography has been somewhat neglected in the United States, Louis Bean of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Harold F. Gosnell of the University of Chicago, and Stuart Rice of the Central Statistical Board in Washington have done much to remedy this deficiency. Dr. Bean, particularly, has devoted much time in recent years to the study of political trends by regions and to the relationship of voting trends to economic factors. His book, *Voting Behavior*, is a useful handbook for those interested in political trends as revealed by election results. Rice and Gosnell were among the first to see the possibilities of quantitative methods in the field of political and public opinion research.

Perhaps no one has given more thought to the present-day relationship of polls to democratic governments than Dr. Saul Forbes Rae of the Department of External Affairs of the Dominion of Canada. In *The Pulse of Democracy*, the philosophy of government by majority opinion, and the role of public opinion polls in defining this majority, are described at length.

Many others have contributed to the techniques and to the growing acceptance of this new field. Among these are Dr. Henry Link, of the Psychological Corporation; Archibald Crossley, of Crossley, Inc.; the late Harry Field, Director of the National Opinion Research Center, and Clyde W. Hart, its present director. Professor Theodore Brown of Harvard and Professor Samuel S. Wilks of Princeton have given great help to those engaged in public opinion fact-finding by their studies on the statistical problems involved in sampling.

Special credit should go to the men and women who have de-

veloped local and state polls of public opinion : Henry J. Kroeger and Norman C. Meier of the Iowa Poll ; Ralph O. Nafziger of the Minnesota Poll and his former associate, Lloyd E. Borg ; Kenneth Fink of the New Jersey State Poll ; Paul Trescott and Alfred Westhoff of the *Philadelphia Bulletin* Poll ; Joe Belden and Alex Louis of the Texas Poll ; Mervin D. Field of the California Poll ; Robert Ahern of the Massachusetts Poll ; and Jane A. Shepherd, formerly of the *Washington Post* Poll.

In the field of interpretation of public opinion poll findings, T. A. Bailey of Stanford University deserves special commendation as one of the very first historians to use opinion poll reports in the writing of history. His skillful and intelligent use of poll material in *A Diplomatic History of the American People* and in *The Man in the Street* should be of interest to public opinion experts everywhere.

In countries outside the United States, the work of public opinion measurement has made great strides. Only a few of the men responsible for this development can be mentioned in the space of this Foreword : Roy Morgan of the Australian Public Opinion Polls, Henry Durant of the British Institute of Public Opinion, Wilfrid Sanders of the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, Ditlev Reventlow of the Dansk Gallup Institut (Denmark), Alfred Max and Jean Stoetzel of the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (France), Artturi Raula of Suomen Gallup O/Y (Finland), Jan Stapel and W. J. de Jonge of the Nederlandsch Instituut voor de Publieke Opinie (Holland), P. Luzzatto-Fegiz of DOXA (Italy), Bjorn Balstad of the Norsk Gallup Institutt (Norway), Sven O. Blomquist of the Svenska Gallup Institutet (Sweden), Auricelio Penteado of the Instituto Brasileiro de Opiniao Publica é Estatistica (Brazil), and H. Wahl Asmussen, coordinator of the Scandinavian Institutes. The above organizations are affiliated in the International Association of Public Opinion (Gallup) Institutes with the American Institute of Public Opinion.



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**A GUIDE TO  
PUBLIC OPINION POLLS**



# The Function of Public Opinion Polls

## 1

“How can polls aid the processes of democracy?”

OF ALL writers who have discussed the role of public opinion in American democracy, none foresaw more clearly than James Bryce the importance of a periodic check on the will of the people. Writing some fifty years ago, Bryce said that the next stage in the development of democratic government would be reached “if the will of the majority of citizens were to become ascertainable at all times.”

In two respects Bryce saw the need of better methods of ascertaining public opinion. He noted that “the choice of one man against another is an imperfect way of expressing the mind of a constituency.” Recent political history provides ample evidence of the difficulty of analyzing election returns on candidates in a way to reveal the will of the people on specific issues.

Bryce also pointed out that with the quickening pace of events, many problems might come up between elections which could not be submitted to the electorate. He wrote that “the action of opinion is continuous, that of voting occasional, and in the intervals between the elections of legislative bodies, changes may take place materially affecting the views of voters.” The accuracy of this observation has been borne out innumerable times in the last few years.

By their very nature, modern sampling polls can and do separate the popularity of candidates from the popularity of issues. Polls can report which views of a candidate the public favors,

which they reject. The speed with which sampling referenda can be completed for the entire nation is such that public opinion on any given issue can be reported within forty-eight hours if the occasion warrants. Thus the goal has nearly been reached when public opinion can be "ascertainable at all times."

The problem confronting statesmen who have had to rely on guesswork in determining the will of the people was well described three decades ago by President Woodrow Wilson in a talk before the National Press Club. Wilson said to the assembled newspapermen:

"You say, 'All the people out my way think so and so.' Now, I know perfectly well that you have not talked with all the people out your way. I find that out again and again. . . . The people of the United States . . . are thinking for themselves, every man for himself; and you do not know, and, the worst of it is, since the responsibility is mine, I do not know what they are thinking about. I have the most imperfect means of finding out, and yet I have got to act as if I knew. . . . I am not put here to do what I please."

## 2

"Most students of government view with alarm the growing influence of spokesmen of pressure groups. Can polls do anything to thwart these lobbyists?"

THE chief weapon of the spokesman for a pressure group in seeking special legislative favors is the threat to punish at the next election any legislator who goes contrary to the selfish interests of his group.

To make this threat carry weight, the pressure group spokesman must claim a united front in the organization he represents.

He must convince legislators that he voices the unanimous or nearly unanimous views of his membership, that all feel so keenly about the particular legislation in question that they would vote against any candidate for office who opposes it.

Pressure groups have grown to their present powerful position in government because no organization or method existed to deflate their claims. When spokesmen talked about swinging millions of votes for or against a measure, the legislator had no effective way of countering these claims.

Public opinion polls can find out quickly and accurately the views of any group in the population. They can show, and often do, when the rank and file of the membership in a group hold views opposite those of their official spokesmen. Polls can thus limit the claims of pressure groups to the facts, and thus prevent many insupportable demands for special privilege.

During recent years, polls of organized workers have, on many occasions, found them taking exactly the opposite points of view from the spokesmen of labor organizations. Likewise, they have found farmers going contrary to the claims of their leaders, business men taking opposite views from the heads of business associations, war veterans failing to see eye to eye with officers of the American Legion or other veterans' organizations.

### 3

“Hundreds of minority groups have their spokesmen. What about the views of the inarticulate majority?”

PUBLIC opinion polls can not only deflate the claims of pressure groups and of minorities seeking special privilege, but, more important, they can reveal the will of the inarticulate and unorganized majority of the citizens.



Persons who write or wire their Congressmen and who go to other lengths to put pressure on their legislators usually have a "fish to fry." They have been aptly described as the "articulate minority." Whether their views actually represent minority viewpoints or majority viewpoints can be ascertained only by examination of the views of all citizens.

An analysis published in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* of more than 30,000 letters received by fourteen Senators during the summer of 1940 concerning the Burke-Wadsworth Selective Service Bill provides an interesting example.

The Burke-Wadsworth Bill proposed that all men between the ages of 21 and 31 should be required to register and should be liable for one year of military service. During the time the bill was under debate and letters to the Congressmen were pouring in, a survey of public opinion, covering an accurate national cross section of voters, shed light on the views of the entire public.

The results below indicate that if these fourteen Senators had based their votes solely on the mail they received, they would have gone counter to the wishes of a majority of the people, as reflected in the poll.

Opinion Expressed in Congressional Mail on Selective Service Bill

For the Bill	10%
Against the Bill	90%

Opinion Expressed on Poll Question: "Do you favor increasing the size of our Army and Navy by drafting men between the ages of 21 and 31 to serve in the armed forces for one year?"

In favor	68%
Against	27%
No opinion	5%

“Public opinion must have its limitations and so must public opinion polls. Are there areas where the views of the people are likely to have little value?”

IT SHOULD be borne in mind at all times that polling organizations are merely fact-finding agencies. Their responsibility begins and ends with the ascertaining of facts regarding public opinion. They have no rightful concern whatsoever with what is done about these facts. In this sense they perform the same function in the realm of public opinion as the Associated Press, the United Press, or the International News Service in reporting objectively the events of the day.

Bryce displayed keen insight into democratic government when he wrote:

“The people who are by power entitled to say what they want, are less qualified to say *how*, and *in what form*, they are to attain it; or, in other words, public opinion can *determine ends*, but is less fit to examine and select the means to these ends.”

The public cannot be expected to render sound judgments on problems or issues about which they are ill informed. Nor, for the same reason, can they be expected to have intelligent views regarding matters of a wholly technical nature.

“Won’t the country suffer when its leaders begin to pay a lot of attention to public opinion polls?”

A TRUE statesman will never change his ideals or his principles to make them conform to the opinions of any group, be it large or small. Rather, such a leader will try to persuade the public to accept his views and his goals. In fact, his success as a leader will in large part be measured by his success in making converts to his way of thinking.

Throughout history the most effective leaders have been those who have had a keen understanding of the public—leaders who have known the views and prejudices of their followers, their lack of knowledge and misinformation, their hopes and aspirations.

Leaders who do not know what the public thinks, or the state of the public’s knowledge on any issue, are likely to be ineffective and unsuccessful leaders, and eventually to lose their opportunity to lead. In the same sense, a military leader who does not take pains to discover the strength and disposition of the enemy troops is likely to lose the battle, and his head.

Great leaders will seek information from every reliable source about the people whom they wish to lead. For this reason they will inevitably pay more attention to facts about the current state of public thinking and of public knowledge. The public opinion poll will be a useful tool in enabling them to reach the highest level of their effectiveness as leaders.

The answer to the question posed above, then, is not that the country will suffer when its leaders begin to pay a lot of attention to public opinion polls. The country will suffer when its leaders ignore, or make wrong guesses about the public’s views on important issues.

“Can the same machinery which is used to gather opinions be used to gather other facts?”

POLLING organizations can devote themselves either to gathering facts about public opinion or to facts about people's lives—facts which often are of equal importance to legislators and to administrators of government departments and agencies.

Often it is a matter of importance to good government to know the extent of unemployment, the income status of the people, their information about new taxes, the extent to which the people plan to cooperate with the government in special programs, and hundreds of similar questions.

The sampling procedure used by public opinion polls has come to be so widely accepted in this field of administration that virtually all information of this type is now collected, or will be in future years, by the same methods now employed by polling organizations to ascertain the views of the people.

The economy and speed of sampling, as contrasted with complete enumeration, have led the United States Bureau of the Census to make extensive use of this method in its work of gathering information for many government agencies. During the recent war the War Department had its own complete organization for polling army personnel on their needs and problems. The Department of Agriculture maintains a staff trained in modern sampling procedures.

“Can you name any specific instances in which public opinion polls have speeded up the processes of democracy?”

ALMOST always the public is ahead of its legislators. This is perhaps natural and desirable in a democracy. Be that as it may, many examples can be cited to show how majority opinion has preceded legislative action in recent years.

In the spring of 1940 when the American Institute of Public Opinion first showed substantial support for peacetime compulsory military service, no legislator—in fact no leader of either major political party in the United States—had publicly advocated such a far-reaching program. Had public opinion been left to manifest itself through the usual channels, the conscription program, all-important to America's war effort, might have been delayed many months.

Again, in an entirely different realm, factual knowledge of public opinion paved the way for needed legislation. Without facts regarding the public's attitude toward measures to control venereal disease, it would be unrealistic to expect a legislator to risk public censure by advocating control measures.

Public opinion polls went directly to the people to discover their views on this subject and the steps they thought should be taken to fight this plague. The public was found ready to accept measures to bring venereal disease under control, and not at all squeamish about discussing the subject openly. Once these facts were known, a score of state legislatures adopted control measures.

Had public opinion polls existed twenty years ago there is every likelihood that they would have uncovered the same public attitudes, with the result that control measures could have

been taken at a much earlier time. Is it too much to assert that facts about the public's attitude on this social problem might have saved hundreds of thousands of lives and millions of dollars in hospitalization costs?

## 8

“Just what is meant by public opinion polls?  
Can you explain them in language that a  
layman can understand?”

THERE is little that is new in polling methods. For the most part the work of polling organizations represents merely an orderly and systematic extension of the practices followed by political observers and men in public office through the years.

Fifty years ago James Bryce came to the conclusion that the best way to ascertain public opinion was to move “freely about among all sorts and conditions of men . . . noting how they are affected by the news or arguments brought from day to day to their knowledge” by means of “unbiased persons with good opportunities for observing.” Moreover, he believed that “talk is the best way of reaching the truth, because in talk one gets directly at the facts.”

It has been a custom of long standing for newspapers and magazines to send their special writers on tours of the country to report election trends, and to sound opinion on major issues. These observers were sent out into the highways and byways for one reason: the editors knew that in this way the writers would arrive at a more accurate appraisal of public opinion than they could by sitting in their offices. Politicians long ago reached the same conclusion. Few would disagree with the statement that the best way to find out how people in their districts think is to go out and talk to them.

In essence this is what a polling organization does. It sends representatives out to talk to the people. The chief differences between the new procedure and the old are these two :

1. Polling organizations reach thousands of people, whereas the political observer or candidate for office could at best talk to only a fraction of this number.

2. Polling organizations take great precautions to make certain that all classes of persons are covered in all sections of the country, and in the proper proportions.

The polling agency must constantly make use of census material, election figures, and other data to be sure that it is reaching the right number of persons in each income level, each age and educational level in each area of the country. It must be sure that it has the right number of persons by occupations, by racial and religious groups, by political preference, by sex. It must make certain that it has not included in its surveys too many members of labor unions, or too few. It must have the right number of persons from large cities and small cities, from towns and from farms.

All of this requires careful and constant study. But certainly no mystic formulae are required.

The trained statistician is a useful worker in this field because of his ability to analyze election figures and census reports, and his ability to test new methods. He may miss some of the overtones of opinion, which a highly skilled political writer might discover, but on the other hand, he is more likely to approach his task with a scientific attitude.

Although the layman doesn't recognize it as polling, he is himself daily conducting his own private poll of public opinion. When he talks to his wife at breakfast about an issue of current interest, he has started his polling for the day. When he meets his friends on the bus or train and learns their views on the same issue, he has added to his "sample." Later, when he arrives at his office, and talks to his associates, he has added more cases. At the end of the day, whether he realizes it or not, he has formu-

lated at least an impression of public opinion, inaccurate though this impression may be. And he has, whether he knows it or not, gone through the basic motions of conducting a poll.

Because the job has not been done systematically, because he has listened, for the most part, to friends and associates who have the same economic and educational background as himself, and who hold the same general views, he is likely to have a distorted idea of how the public thinks about a given issue. He hasn't observed the simplest and most basic rule of polling—*which is to see that each segment of society is properly represented.*



# Size of the Sample

## 9

“How many persons have to be included in a poll to obtain reliable results?”

SIZE and accuracy are inextricably linked in the minds of most laymen. Invariably the first question that is asked by persons who examine the results of a public opinion survey is: “How many persons were included?”

Actually, the size of the sample (the number of persons interviewed) is far less important as a factor in achieving reliable results in modern polling than several other factors, among the most important of which are the accuracy with which the persons chosen to be interviewed mirror the total group, the wording of the question or questions used to develop the information, and the accuracy and lack of bias or influence in the interviewing procedure itself.

The number of persons who must be included in a sample or cross section can be determined by reference to the laws of probability, first set out by Bernouilli in 1713. But even if the director of a polling organization had no knowledge of these laws, the exercise of common sense would prove to be a sufficiently good guide. All that he would have to do is to follow the simple plan of adding cases until these additions failed to make any important difference in the results.

One example, selected by chance from hundreds of similar ones that might be used, deals with the nation's attitude toward prohibition, as reported by the American Institute of Public Opinion early in 1944.

The first national sample containing proper proportions of the various population groups included 1,327 interviews. To deter-

mine the extent of variation resulting solely from the number of persons reached, this sample was divided in a random manner into three groups of approximately the same size.

The first sample showed the following results:

Persons favoring the return of prohibition	137	or	31%
Persons opposing the return of prohibition	276	or	62%
Those without opinions or undecided	29	or	7%
Total	442		

When results of the second and third samples are added to the figures given above, the following totals emerge:

	FAVOR PROHI- BITION	OPPOSE PROHI- BITION	NO OPINION
First sample of 442	31%	62%	7%
First and second samples totaling 884	29%	63%	8%
First, second, and third samples totaling 1,327	30%	63%	7%

Additional surveys were conducted on this issue until a total of 12,494 persons had been interviewed, with results as follows:

	FAVOR PROHI- BITION	OPPOSE PROHI- BITION	NO OPINION
When 2,585 persons had been interviewed	31%	61%	8%
When 5,255 persons had been interviewed	33%	59%	8%
When 8,253 persons had been interviewed	32%	60%	8%
When 12,494 persons had been interviewed	32%	61%	7%

The above figures reveal that the greatest difference between the results for the entire sample of 12,494 and the various smaller samples was 2 percentage points for those opposed to prohibition, and the maximum difference between any two samples of any size was 4 percentage points.

The important point demonstrated here is that this survey of the nation's attitude toward the return of prohibition might have included any number of persons from 442 up to 12,494 and the results would have been substantially the same.

A similar study, embracing still larger samples, was reported in *The Pulse of Democracy* and concerned an Institute survey of national opinion on the N.R.A. In 1936, this question: "Would you like to see the N.R.A. revived?" was answered by 30,000 persons. The first 500 cases showed a "no" vote of 54.9 per cent. The complete sample of 30,000 cases returned a "no" vote of 55.5 per cent. In short, the addition of 29,500 cases to the first group of 500 made a difference of less than 1 per cent in the national findings. Here are the figures:

NUMBER OF CASES	VOTING AGAINST REVIVING N.R.A.
First 500 ballots	54.9%
First 1,000 ballots	53.9%
First 5,000 ballots	55.4%
First 10,000 ballots	55.4%
All 30,000 ballots	55.5%

These actual examples are cited because they are typical of those with which polling organizations work from week to week. They reveal, better than statistical formulae, why it is unnecessary and wasteful to pile up hundreds of thousands of cases in scientific sampling surveys once an accurate cross section has been laid out.

“Just how small can samples be and still be accurate in predicting the results of elections on candidates or issues?”

ASSUMING that a sample has been chosen which is truly representative of the voting population, as few as 100 voters might provide a good prediction of an election or a referendum. Obviously, other things being equal, the larger the sample, the greater is the certainty of accuracy. But it does not necessarily follow, as one congressman suggested, that it is as “certain as daylight will follow darkness that a large sample will provide more accurate results than a small sample.” A sample of 10,000,000 improperly selected can be less accurate than a sample of 100 properly selected.

Formulae have been developed which give the range of error that may result from the size of the sample used for random sampling. Tables based on these formulae show the range of error at each stage as the size of the sample is increased. For example, if only 100 persons properly selected were interviewed in a national survey, the outside margin of error would be 15 per cent. That is to say, 997 times out of 1,000 on the average, the error would not go beyond 15 per cent. When 900 persons throughout the nation are interviewed, the outside limit of error due solely to the size of the sample is reduced to 5 per cent. When 10,000 people have been interviewed, the range of error has been reduced to 1.5 per cent. From this point on, as the sample is increased, the error continues to be reduced, but at an extremely low rate. Even if 50,000,000 voters were interviewed, a small error would still be present.

The error limitation resulting from the size of the sample varies according to factors inherent in the kinds of stratification

used. In general it may be said, however, that the error limits resulting from size of sample fluctuations are not materially different in most public opinion surveys from the figures for random sampling.

When it is taken into account that the expense of reaching 100,000 people is approximately ten times the cost of reaching 10,000, and the cost of reaching 1,000,000 is approximately 100 times the cost of 10,000, it can be seen that there is little sense in paying such a tremendous price for increasing the certainty of accuracy by less than one per cent. To add cases to achieve this additional accuracy would be as profligate for the public opinion researcher as for a farmer to use fifty horses to draw a wagon that could as easily be drawn by two.

Experiments in predicting elections on the basis of extremely small samples are described by Hadley Cantril in *Gauging Public Opinion*. These studies again underscore the importance of the cross section in arriving at accurate results, and the lesser importance of the size of the sample.

The Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton, headed by Professor Cantril, investigated the voting intentions of a carefully selected sample of just 200 people in New York state, prior to the New York state gubernatorial election in the fall of 1942. The survey was made by a single interviewer who traveled around the state during the week preceding the election.

Interviews were distributed as follows:

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS	
NEW YORK CITY	
Manhattan	24
Brooklyn	34
Bronx	19
Queens	19
UPSTATE	
Cities over 500,000	9
100,000 to 500,000	10

10,000 to 100,000	40
2,500 to 10,000	10
Under 2,500	25
Farms	10
	<hr/>
Total	200

Persons interviewed were selected in a manner to provide a good cross section of the population with respect to color, economic status, and age. The voting intentions of the 200 persons interviewed were:

Dewey	115
Bennett	72
Alfange	12
Amter	1
	<hr/>
	200

The table below shows that the error in predicting Dewey's victory was only 5 per cent, and the average error for the three leading candidates only  $3\frac{1}{3}$  per cent.

	OPOR SURVEY	ELECTION RESULT
Dewey	58%	53%
Bennett	36%	37%
Alfange	6%	10%

This survey was only 1 per cent less accurate than that of the *New York Daily News*, which based its prediction on 48,000 interviews. The American Institute of Public Opinion, in its prediction, was exactly right on Dewey's percentage and had an average error of only  $1\frac{1}{3}$  per cent for the top three candidates. The number of cases it based its final prediction upon was 2,500.

A far more difficult project undertaken by the Office of Public Opinion Research was the survey regarding the outcome of the

plebiscite in Canada in 1942 on the question of conscription for overseas service. In addition to normal problems of sampling, language problems had to be met in covering the Province of Quebec.

Only two interviewers were employed, and only 208 persons were polled—107 in the Province of Quebec, 101 in the Province of Ontario.

Again the interviews were distributed geographically and by size of cities. The interviewers tried to reach all classes within the limits of these small cross sections. The interviewer assigned to Quebec was told to keep the right ratio of French Canadians to British Canadians, as indicated by census data on this province.

The results of this study for each province are :

	OPOR SURVEY	ELECTION RESULT
<i>Quebec</i>		
Voting "yes" on plebiscite	32%	28%
Voting "no"	68%	72%
<i>Ontario</i>		
Voting "yes"	88%	84%
Voting "no"	12%	16%

The average error in these two provinces was 4 per cent, which compares favorably with an average error of only 3 per cent for the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion in the same two provinces, using samples of 1,000 in each province.

Further confirmation of the relative unimportance of the number of persons included in a survey comes from an analysis of the state-by-state predictions of the American Institute of Public Opinion in the 1940 and 1944 elections.

The average error in the 48-state predictions was 2.4 percentage points in 1940 and 2.5 in 1944. When the errors on these

48-state predictions are divided into two groups on the basis of the interviews made in each, the following figures emerge:

	AVERAGE ERROR	
	1940	1944
In the twenty-four states with the largest samples	2.3%	2.4%
In the twenty-four states with the smallest samples	2.5%	2.6%

## 11

“Why haven’t I been interviewed? Why have I never heard of anyone who has been interviewed?”

THESE questions come up frequently in connection with modern public opinion surveys, because most persons do not understand how it is possible to get an accurate measurement of public opinion when only a small part of the total population is interviewed.

Old-fashioned “straw polls” relied almost entirely for their accuracy on *numbers*. As shown on previous pages, modern sampling polls rely for their accuracy on an entirely different principle—the careful selection of a *small but representative cross section*.

In this respect, modern surveys merely apply to public opinion research certain well-established procedures which have been used for years in the fields of engineering, medicine, education, and all the social sciences. When an engineer wishes to judge the quality of ore in a mine, he examines a few “samples.” From these samples he makes a highly accurate estimate of the amount and quality of ore in the mine. A government wheat tester gauges the quality of a carload of grain by taking a few carefully selected samples.



Samples chosen to represent public opinion provide a faithful replica of the total electorate. It is of little consequence whether this image is life-size or whether it is reduced to a fraction of the original, just as a photograph can be reduced in size and still remain a truthful and accurate portrait.

No case has yet been recorded of a nationwide poll which has gone wrong because too few persons were interviewed. The *Literary Digest* poll of 1936 sent ballots to more than 10,000,000 persons and yet was less accurate than modern polls embracing less than one per cent of this number.

The odds against any one person being interviewed in a modern sampling poll are gigantic. They can be worked out by simple arithmetic. Suppose that a poll in any given week covers a total of 3,000 persons. The chances of being interviewed that week are then 3,000 out of about 94,000,000, the number of adults in the country, or one chance in 31,333.

With a sample of 3,000 taken weekly, a total of 156,000 persons would be reached in a year, or less than one per cent of the total adult population.

Since the average life expectancy of a person reaching the age of twenty-one is about fifty years, this means that the average person would have less than *one chance in ten* of ever being interviewed in his lifetime, with samples based upon an average of 3,000 per week.

## 12

“How can the opinions of a small sample be representative of a much larger group?”

IF A sample is accurately selected, it represents a near replica of the entire population. It is a miniature electorate with the same proportion of farmers, doctors, lawyers, Catholics, Protestants,

old people, young people, businessmen, laborers, and so on, as is to be found in the entire population.

When samples are correctly selected, therefore, they do reflect opinions of the entire nation, with the small margin of error described earlier.

The parallel between public opinion samples and the samples selected in the field of science may prove illuminating. All medical research has, to a great extent, been based upon research with samples. When a new drug or a new treatment is tried out, no attempt is made to try out the treatment on millions of people. If it is found to work effectively with a few hundred cases, it is assumed that it will work with equal effectiveness on the entire population under exactly similar conditions.

## 13

### “How many people actually are interviewed in a survey?”

THE number interviewed in a survey depends upon the statistical problems involved and on the degree of accuracy which the polling organization hopes to maintain. Generally speaking, samples range from 1,500 to 5,000 for national surveys, although there are some that are larger and some that are smaller because of special considerations or requirements. In the case of the American Institute of Public Opinion, samples vary generally from 3,000 to 60,000. In foreign countries, polling organizations affiliated with the American Institute of Public Opinion use samples which vary from 1,500 to about 3,500 in obtaining national coverage.

When the sample totals 1,500 persons, 4 per cent is the normal outside range or maximum error due solely to the size of the sample regardless of how sentiment divides. When the sample

includes 5,000 persons, the normal outside range of error is limited to 2.5 per cent.

From years of experience it has been found that a high level of stability can be reached with as few as 400 interviews in any subsection. Normally, reports on any state or city are not provided if the cross section does not include this number of interviews. In the case of a sample of 400, the maximum error, due to the size factor, is 8 per cent.

## 14

“Does the size of the sample have to be a fixed percentage of the population group sampled?”

REFERENCE to previous pages, which deal with size of sample, will show why the answer to this question is “no.” In some fields of commercial research it is mistakenly believed that the sample should be a certain fixed percentage, usually 5 per cent of the total population. So long as the “universe,” or population sampled, is many times larger than the sample, there need be no fixed relationship between the two.

# The Cross Section

## 15

“What is meant by random sampling, and what is meant by stratified sampling?”

A **RANDOM SAMPLE** is one which is selected so that each person in the total population to be covered has an equal chance of being included. If it were possible to line up all the adults in the United States and get them to stand still long enough to permit interviewers to interview every 1,000th or every 1,000,000th person, this would be considered a randomized procedure provided the order in which people were lined up was purely a chance one.

In *stratified sampling* the units to be sampled are first grouped according to certain characteristics, such as geographic location, size of city, type of industry, type of agriculture, etc. Then, if a random procedure is used, units are selected by chance from these subgroups or strata. This tends to increase the likelihood that each of these groups will be properly represented in the sample and at the same time retains all the essential features of a random sample. In terms of the example above, this might mean lining up all the adults in the United States in groups according to the state in which they live and then selecting every 1,000th person. This geographic stratification would increase the probability of getting the proper proportion of residents of each state in the sample. In a similar manner, stratification can be carried out using any other characteristic or characteristics.

“What is area sampling? What is quota sampling, and what is the difference between them?”

THE two methods of sample design which are now in most general use in public opinion and marketing surveys are most commonly referred to as area sampling and quota sampling.

*Area sampling* is designed to achieve randomness in sampling. The areas in which the sampling is to be done are selected at random, usually making use of the principle of stratification. The households within these areas are also selected in a random manner. If individuals, rather than households, are to be sampled, the particular individuals within the sample households should also be chosen by chance.

The following statement by Morris H. Hansen, of the Bureau of the Census, and Philip M. Hauser, formerly of the Bureau, provides a description of area sampling:

“To illustrate how and why area sampling works, suppose we are interested in sampling for certain characteristics of the population in a city. For example, we may want to know the total number of persons in certain broad occupational groups, and the number within each of these occupation groups who have a particular opinion, read a specified magazine, or are in a certain income class.

“To estimate the total number of persons having the various characteristics mentioned above, we might proceed by first making an up-to-date list containing the name of every person, or, at considerably less expense, identifying every address or household, in the area to be surveyed, and then selecting a sample from this listing. Through taking a random sample from such listings of individuals or of households (interviewing all persons within the selected households if households are sampled), we

could, with an adequate size of sample, obtain an excellent cross section of the people in the city for any problem. This procedure would lead to highly reliable sample results, but frequently it is not practical for a number of reasons—the principal one being that preparing a listing would cost too much. Moreover, even where a complete pre-listing is already available, it may be too costly to interview the widely scattered sample that would be obtained by sampling individuals (or households) at random from such a listing. One method of getting a reduction in cost over sampling individuals from a pre-listing is to use an area-sampling method in which the individuals interviewed are clustered into a selected set of sample areas.

“In area sampling the entire area in which the population to be covered is located is subdivided into smaller areas, and each individual in the population is associated with one and only one such small area—for example, the particular small area in which he resides. Neither the names nor numbers of persons residing in the areas need be known in advance. A sample of these small areas is drawn, and all or a subsample of the population residing in the selected areas is covered in the survey.

“A simple illustration will show that if a complete list of areas is available and a random selection of a sample of areas is made, and if the population of these sample areas is completely enumerated, then the chances (or probabilities) of being included are the same for each individual in the population. Moreover, on the average, the population surveyed within such a sample will reveal precisely the characteristics of the entire population from which the sample was drawn. A sample can be made as reliable a cross section as desired, for any characteristics whatever, by merely increasing the size of the sample. Thus, if the population is changing in character, a random cross section of small areas will reveal those shifts.”

*Quota sampling* procedure requires that persons be selected from all major groups in the population in proportion to the numerical size of these groups. The first step in making use of

this method of sampling is to divide the total population of the nation or of each state or city into its component parts or strata and to make certain that each part is represented in the sample in proportion to its magnitude.

The individual interviewers are told what assignments they are to obtain in each group. That is, the interviewers are told the number of farmers to be included in completing their assignments, the number of townspeople, the number of men and women, the number in each age group, and the number in any other category used as a "control." (See pp. 32, 33.) While the area in which they are to interview is circumscribed—it may be a block, a neighborhood, a ward, a city, a town, or a county—the selection of the individual respondents to fill out the assigned quotas is left in the hands of the individual interviewers.

A number of sampling operations represent compromises between area sampling and quota sampling. For example, in certain instances the sample will be based upon an area design but the interviewer will have latitude in selecting the individual respondent within each household who is to be interviewed.

## 17

“What are the advantages of area sampling, and what are the advantages of quota sampling?”

THE advantages of area sampling have been stated as follows by Morris H. Hansen and Philip M. Hauser :

“Area sampling eliminates dependence on the assignment of quotas that may be more or less seriously in error, and does not permit the interviewer discretion in the choice of the individuals to be included in the sample. With appropriate methods of designating areas for coverage in the sample, the probabilities of the

inclusion of the various elements of the population are known, and consequently the reliability of results from the sample can be measured and controlled. Area sampling, of course, is not the only method that produces such results, but it is frequently an effective method."

The advantages of quota sampling for public opinion surveys are two: greater speed and lower cost. These advantages operate both in the planning of the sample in the first place and in the completion of the interviewing phase of the survey. The setting up of an area sample requires the use of a great many detailed maps and aerial photographs which are expensive and take a great deal of time to assemble. In addition, because of the detailed instructions which must be furnished to the interviewers for selecting each individual respondent, it is a costly and time-consuming process to design the sample. Each survey requires new instructions. On the other hand, quota sampling needs fewer maps; the quotas can be quickly set up using government data, election figures, and other available information; and the same design can be used for a number of surveys without running into the problem of reinterviewing the same respondents.

It is obvious that any system of sampling which requires that certain specified persons be interviewed—with no substitutions permitted—is likely to be far more costly and time-consuming than a system which permits substitutions, or one which gives interviewers some latitude in selection, as in quota sampling. A high proportion of adults are not at home during the normal working day of 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. Therefore any system which requires interviewers to work after these hours or on weekends and to make a number of call-backs can certainly not be expected to be as inexpensive or as fast-operating as a system which permits interviewers to work in those places and areas where respondents are available during these hours. To obtain an accurate cross section of all adults—at least during normal working hours—interviewers must distribute their calls in business, factory, farm, and home areas. However, when the sampling unit is



the household rather than the individual, and when any member of the family can report accurately on the subject of the survey, the interviewing part of area sampling is less costly.

While the accuracy of quota sampling cannot be determined from mathematical formulae—principally because of the inability to calculate the interviewer selection factor—there does exist a growing record of performance of public opinion polls which have in the past been operating on quota sampling principles.

The American Institute of Public Opinion has made 134 election predictions in the ten-year period 1938-1947 inclusive. (These election predictions were in each case the final figure published in connection with an election. The figure was published less than a month before the election and was published showing the actual division of the vote—that is, with “undecided” eliminated.) During this time the average net error from all sources other than size of sample has averaged less than two percentage points per prediction. The following table shows how the error may be divided between the probable error that might be expected to result from a random sample of the same size and the error from all other sources.

AVERAGE OF 134 ELECTION PREDICTIONS, 1938-1947

Probable error based on formula for random samples	1.2%
Average of net errors from all other sources	1.6%
Average error from both sources	2.8%

Among the factors that have contributed to the average error from all other sources of 1.6 per cent are the following: the method of sampling, errors resulting from the selection of a limited number of areas for interviewing, interviewer dishonesty, interviewer bias, last-minute changes not covered, prestige, turnout, machine activity, dishonesty in election procedure, and the weather.

During this same period, other polling organizations in this

country and abroad, using samples of the same magnitude, have built up a sizable record of election predictions which can be used as a basis for evaluating the average error from all sources other than size of sample. The average error in 146 election predictions is 3.4 per cent, which indicates on the average an experience comparable to that of the American Institute of Public Opinion.

## 18

### “What is pin-point sampling?”

DURING 1943 and 1944 the American Institute of Public Opinion experimented with a variant of area sampling, called pin-point sampling. Small areas or districts were selected and as many as possible of the potential voters of each area were interviewed as could be reached within a rather short span of time—usually one or two days.

In 1944 a group of 40 pin-point areas were selected, eight in each of the five states of New York, Maryland, Ohio, Missouri, and California. The Institute's national prediction in 1944 was based in part on the results of the interviewing in these pin-point areas.

The results highlighted one of the weaknesses of this technique, namely, the possible error resulting from the selection of the individual area. The areas were selected on the basis of past political behavior and were chosen to be as nearly representative as possible, taken as a group, of the individual states from which they were drawn.

On the average, the completed interviews represented about one-fourth of the voters in each district, with interviews being completed in about half of the households. While there were errors in individual districts, taken as a whole the sample proved a highly reliable forecast of how the 40 areas would vote: the error was only 0.1 percentage point. As a forecast of how the

entire nation would vote, the sample of the 40 areas showed an error of 1.9 percentage points. The error therefore resulted almost entirely from the selection of the areas in the first place.

## 19

“Can you describe how you go about the problem of selecting people to be interviewed in quota sampling?”

WHEN the method of quota sampling is employed, in contrast to area sampling, care must be taken to see that the national cross section includes the right proportion of citizens from every walk of life.

A careful study must first be made of the population structure. By and large, the most important factors which have to be considered are occupational groups, income levels, political preferences, age, education, racial and religious groups. And these major groups must be represented correctly by cities of various sizes, and by rural areas. On occasion, other factors may be found to be important. For example, on some issues which involve labor unions it may be important to test the sample to see that it contains the right number of union members. Or, in the case of an issue which involves the farm population, it would be equally important to test the sample to see that it contains the right number of farm renters and owners.

Typically, when a cross section correctly represents the major occupational and income groups, and is distributed strictly according to population, the other factors enumerated above, as a rule, are found to be included in proper proportions. But, as pointed out above, it is an easy matter to test any cross section by adding another question or two to discover whether this is actually the case.

It might be important on occasion, for example, to test a sample to see that it includes the right number of people of German ancestry. By simply adding a question on the ballot to secure this information, it is possible to compare the results with census data.

By examining government data and election figures, information on these major "controls" can readily be obtained. On other points it may be necessary for the polling organization to collect its own information. When all the facts regarding the basic population structure of a city or of a nation are known, the job of laying out a sample is not difficult. For example, if 20 per cent of the adults of the nation are engaged in farming, then obviously 20 per cent of the total sample for the nation must consist of farmers. If 2 per cent of all the adults of the nation are in families which are receiving some form of government assistance—such as relief, old-age assistance, or aid to the blind—then 2 per cent of the total sample must be made up of persons in this category. If 20 per cent of all the adults of the country are between the ages of 21 and 29 years of age, then 20 per cent of the total sample must come from this group. If 15 percent of all the people in the country live in cities of 100,000 or larger, then this percentage of people must be represented in the total sample. If 10 per cent of all the people in the United States live in the state of New York, then this percentage of the total sample must come from New York in a sample made up state-by-state.

By following this procedure, every group and every area of the country can be properly represented in the sample.

Sometimes election figures have certain advantages over census data in that elections are held more frequently and the results are available more promptly. Political behavior, therefore, is also an important category in determining sample composition.

“Do you make up lists of people to be interviewed?”

No. Each interviewer is assigned a definite number of interviews to be made within each major economic category in the selected communities where the interviewers work. They are not given lists of names, but select at random the people within each category. For example, an interviewer in Chicago, or in Birmingham, or Quebec, might be assigned to interview 10 persons in the upper economic group 15 in the middle, and 15 in the lower. These he selects at random within each category, and from residents of the geographical area assigned.

When the major socio-economic groups are properly covered a sample, as a rule, is found to include an accurate representation of persons by religious groups, by races, and by other factors equally important. Whether or not any one sample does include proper distribution of any one category must always be ascertained by subjecting returned ballots to a careful analysis.

“Are cross sections always the same?”

THE cross section just described embraces the whole adult population of the country. On social issues this type of cross section is preferable. However, such a cross section of the whole population would not be representative of the *voting* population of the United States since many adults do not and cannot vote. For example, in southern states the proportion of non-voting is higher than it is in northern states. There are several reasons for this, one of which is the poll tax, and another the barriers placed in the way of Negro voting.

In northern states, as a rule, persons in the very poorest level are less likely to vote than persons of higher income. Therefore, on questions involving strictly political matters, the voting population must constitute the basis of the cross section.

In any place where the voting age has been reduced to 18 (Georgia at the time of this printing) the cross section of the voting population obviously has to be altered to include the proper proportion of people in the 18-19-20 year-old bracket.

## 22

“How do you know when you have a correct cross section?”

On every ballot the interviewer records a number of facts about the person he interviews: how he voted in the last election, his age, his occupation, where he lives, whether he owns an automobile, whether he has a telephone—and, when necessary, such information as his education, his religion, the country from which his ancestors came, his race, his membership in labor or other organizations, etc.

By checking the returned ballots from any given area or from the nation as a whole, the statistical staff can readily learn whether or not these ballots represent a true cross section. By the use of automatic tabulating machines it is possible to find out in a few minutes whether any given sample contains the proper number of farmers, whether it includes the right proportion of people of any age group, whether it embraces the right proportion of persons in any occupational or political group.

By constantly checking the returned ballots against the assigned cross section, it is possible to make certain that every assignment which goes out to interviewers produces a perfect or nearly perfect, cross section.

“Will the time come when some new division of the population may cause samples to be inaccurate?”

PERSONS who ask this question generally have in mind the straw-vote polls like that of the *Literary Digest*. In that case, results were fairly accurate for a number of years; but when opinion divided along economic lines the *Digest* failed to give this fact due weight, and its procedure, therefore, proved inadequate.

Because of their methods of operation, polling organizations today are in a position at any time to find out whether new factors have created different alignments of opinion.

For example, on some issue there may be reason to believe that veterans of World War II would vote differently from other groups in the population. Furthermore, their views might influence the views of other members of their families. By simply adding another question or two to the ballot this point can be tested. The opinions of veterans can be checked against nonveterans.

“Where do you get your information in determining major population groups?”

THE United States Census and official election returns are the most fruitful sources of information on major population groups. Census reports provide detailed information on the population by states, age, sex, education, racial background, occupation, the number of persons who rent and who own their property, and many other similar facts. Many of the census figures are

brought up to date from time to time by means of complete enumerations and sampling surveys conducted by the Bureau of the Census between census years.

Election figures provide an index of the political divisions within every country, city, township, and precinct in the United States.

Treasury Department and Department of Labor and Department of Commerce statistics provide information on income. Various institutions report on automobile ownership, telephone subscription, and the like—facts which are useful in building perfect cross sections.

Further data come from the polling organizations' own operations. When reliable facts on the number of persons differentiated by a given factor or characteristic are not obtainable from any of the sources mentioned above, then it is possible to estimate the number of persons in such a group by a process resembling triangulation. By controlling two or more known factors in the cross section, the size of the unknown group can be judged.

## 25

“Are only leaders of public opinion interviewed, or do polls question the man in the street?”

NORMALLY, every cross section is selected to represent either the entire adult population or the entire voting population. On occasion, a study might be made of a special group, such as club presidents, heads of businesses, labor leaders, leading politicians, and the like, but such a poll would not be a poll of *public* opinion, but a poll of the opinion of a special class or group in the population and would be presented as such.



“Should polls include people below voting age?”

ON certain special issues, the views of younger people are interesting and valuable. On political questions, since persons under twenty-one are unable to vote, except in Georgia, the inclusion of these younger people is pointless.

# The Problem of Questions

27

“How can you ask questions of people in such a manner as to be sure that you are finding out what they really think?”

No ONE has yet found a better way of discovering what people think than by talking to them. And there is a wide variety of ways of putting questions to find out what people really think. An important fact, which is often overlooked, is that public opinion polls can and do make use of many ways of asking questions.

Often it is important to find out if the majority of citizens have actually given any thought to an issue. On other occasions it is important to discover their lack of information or their misinformation on problems of the day. It may be important to know the intensity of their feeling, as well as the direction of their thinking. Or the problem may be one of determining how the public would actually vote if an issue were put to voters in a state or national election.

All of these problems are related to the simple one of finding out what the public thinks about issues of the day, and all can be answered, with a high degree of accuracy, by modern polling procedures. Although refinements in techniques will obviously be made in the future, even as of today the development in methods is such that public opinion can be described as well as measured with great detail. In other words, the public opinion researcher can now do qualitative as well as quantitative analysis.

Polling organizations can assign their interviewers to hold long conversations with persons whom they are assigned to inter-

view, recording at the time, or afterward, the gist of the views held by these persons. In such conversations, interviewers can explore any aspect of the problem which may be useful in shedding light on the views of the person being interviewed. He can do this by direct or by indirect questioning.

Or, instead of leaving all questions to the skill and imagination of the interviewer, a long list can be prepared in advance, a list which covers every facet of the problem in question. Such an "omnibus" questionnaire may contain 200 or 300 questions and may require a whole afternoon or evening to answer. This approach resembles the Socratic method in attempting to learn the truth by cross examination. The omnibus questionnaire method has been found to be extremely useful in isolating factors which influence opinions; in short, in uncovering the "why" of opinions.

## 28

### "What is the 'Quintamensional' Plan of question design?"

MOST questions asked by polling organizations are intended to reveal how the public would vote if the same questions were put to voters in a nationwide referendum. For this reason the great majority of questions are necessarily of the "yes" or "no" type.

This procedure represents the simplest, and certainly the least controversial, method of determining majority opinion. It provides a quantitative measure of public opinion.

Many students of government prefer to think of public opinion in a qualitative sense. They are as much interested in a description of the many facets of public opinion as they are in the relative size of opposing groups.

To measure the qualitative aspects of public opinion, the

American Institute of Public Opinion evolved a plan of question design which is particularly applicable to issues of the day. Because the system provides an opportunity to probe five different aspects of opinion, it has been called the "quintamensional" approach.

Of great value in the development of this plan of question design was the "split-ballot" technique introduced by this same organization in January 1938. With few exceptions every ballot sent out since that date has gone out in two forms—an "A" and a "B" form. Whenever there has been any doubt about the wording of a question, the two ballot forms have provided a way to experiment with different question wordings. Since both forms go to comparable national cross sections, differences in results over and above that which might be expected from sample size could be attributed to the wording of questions. In the nine years since this technique was incorporated in the regular procedures of the American Institute of Public Opinion, many hundreds of alternate question wordings have been tried, and the results analyzed. During this period, regular use has been made of all types of questions: open, dichotomous, filter, multiple choice, etc.

Out of this experience in gauging opinion on many hundreds of issues, a conception of question design which consists of a combination of questions has emerged. It is a design which can be used for probing public opinion on almost any type of issue and at all stages of opinion formation.

Specifically, the quintamensional approach seeks to overcome the following criticisms of public opinion surveys:

1. The charge that questions are put to persons who have no knowledge whatsoever of the issue being surveyed.
2. The criticism that no distinction is made between those who give "snap" judgments, as opposed to those who have actually weighed the pros and cons of an issue.
3. The objection that question wordings are not understood by everyone to mean the same thing.

4. The assertion that entire reliance is placed upon "yes" and "no" questions, whereas, it is held, some complex issues cannot be reduced to a single, dichotomous question.
5. The charge that the "why" of public opinion is ignored, a factor which some critics believe to be of equal importance to the way in which the public divides on an issue.
6. The criticism that the "intensity" with which opinions are held by majority and minority groups is overlooked.

These points constitute the bulk of the criticism of question-asking techniques today.

The quintamensional design makes use of five categories of questions. Within each major category any number of questions can be asked, depending upon the issue and the circumstances. Therefore, while only five or six questions are required to cover all five categories, it will be much more useful to think of this system as a highly flexible one which can be expanded or contracted to meet the needs of a given situation.

Although some variation in the order in which questions are asked is possible, it will be obvious as to why the first two categories must appear in the same order. The five categories consist of these five types of questions.

- |                          |                                  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Filter or information | 3. Dichotomous or specific issue |
| 2. Open or free answer   | 4. Reason why                    |
|                          | 5. Intensity                     |

1. The first category of questions in the quintamensional approach is made up of information and filter questions. These are designed to find out whether the respondent has given any attention or thought to the issue. Many different types of filter questions can be used, but one that has been found particularly useful in connection with proposed legislation is this: "Have you heard or read about the proposal to. . . ?" The person who has neither heard nor read about a bill before Congress obviously is not equipped to give an opinion about it. An effort may be

made later in the interview to describe the plan or proposal and to get the respondent's opinion about it; but the fact that he has not heard or read about it is a useful filter for subsequent questions.

A "yes" answer to the filter question stated above is not proof that the respondent has actually read or heard about a certain proposal. Further questioning is necessary to establish his knowledge, or lack of it.

The questions which follow the opening or filter question require the person being interviewed to prove that he has some familiarity with the proposal. If the issue is one of revising the Taft-Hartley Act, the test questions can ask him to answer any of a dozen simple questions about basic features of the act: "What does it say about the closed shop?" "What does it say about union political activities?" etc.

In this fashion any number of questions can be asked of each person in the survey to determine just how much information he possesses. And, of course, the answers can be tabulated to reveal the opinions of persons with different levels of information.

Still another type of question which can be used to determine the amount and character of information possessed by the respondent on a given issue is the two-part question which asks the person to cite the chief arguments in favor of a given proposal, and then to cite the chief arguments against it. This type of question supplies evidence that the person has gone at least as far in his thinking about an issue as to be able to weigh the arguments pro and con. In this sense it can be used successfully to rule out snap judgments.

The addition of information questions to opinion questions on the same issue opens a whole new realm to students of public opinion. It makes possible the correlation of the amount and character of information, or lack of information, with opinion.

2. The second category of questions are of the "open" or "free answer" variety. Such questions are useful in arriving at the unstructured opinions of the persons interviewed, to reveal the

direction of their thinking. Open questions are useful in bringing to light general attitudes. Because they permit persons to express their views without any limitations whatsoever, they often reveal important viewpoints which might otherwise be overlooked.

But most important of all, the Institute has found that open questions set within the framework of the quintamensional design can be interpreted more accurately because of the reference points provided by this design. The great difficulty in tabulating and interpreting answers to open questions has militated against their wider use in public opinion surveys. One or more open questions can be included in the second category along with non-directive questions of the type used in depth interviews.

3. In the third category come the questions that present specific proposals and ask usually for a "yes" or "no" answer. These are the questions which ask the public to stand up and be counted: they are the most useful of all questions in predicting behavior.

Complex issues must be broken down into specific or categorical questions. This is also necessary when two or more factors are involved in a given issue.

On occasion it may be desirable to explain the issue to respondents in simple and neutral language in order to obtain the views of the maximum number of voters—both those who pass the filter tests and those who fail. In this way the factor of education can be taken into account, and control provided for the fact that the least well-informed persons are usually persons in the lowest economic level.

The open questions preceding those in this category provide one way by which answers to the specific questions and explanatory statements can be judged. By comparing the vote of those who pass the filter and information tests with those who fail, further light can be shed upon factors which have influenced opinion on the issues in question.

All polling organizations permit respondents to record a "no

opinion" vote on specific issue questions. The peculiar advantage which the quintamensional plan provides is that it permits the composition of the "no opinion" vote to be better understood. Without the filter or the open questions it is not feasible to learn whether a respondent who says he has "no opinion" gives his answer because he doesn't know what the issue is all about, or whether he gives it because, after weighing the pros and cons of an issue, he cannot place himself in either the "yes" or "no" columns.

Although experiments are now being undertaken to discover how multiple choice or "cafeteria" questions fit into the quintamensional design, it can be said that there is good reason to believe that this design will correct some of the shortcomings which have been pointed out in the multiple-choice question as it has been used in public opinion polls.

The multiple-choice question represents an attitude scale of three or more statements ranging from one extreme position to another. Respondents are asked to choose the statement which most nearly fits their own viewpoint. The shortcomings of this approach are chiefly these three: (1) it is difficult to present alternatives which represent the whole range of opinion on an issue and which are mutually exclusive; (2) there is a strong tendency for respondents without any information on the issue to choose one of the alternative questions (the "no opinion" vote is almost always very low despite the complexity of the issue); and (3) there is a marked tendency for respondents to avoid extreme positions.

By filtering out the persons who have no information on the issue, the "no opinion" vote becomes much more realistic. And the open questions in the design provide at least some information as to whether the alternatives offered the respondent represent fairly the range of opinion on the issue. Finally, the answers to the open question as well as the intensity questions provide some indication as to whether there has been a conscious or unconscious avoidance of extreme positions within the scale.



Whether or not the multiple-choice type of question will add anything to the quintamensional design remains to be seen. Not until present experiments are completed can this be answered.

4. In the fourth category come the questions seeking to learn the reasons why persons in the sample hold the views they do. Often these "why" questions can be asked not only after the specific issues have been posed, but after the open questions as well. In fact, they often form part of the answer of a respondent to an open question.

In addition to probing opinion from a different angle, "reason why" questions aid in describing opinion, in a qualitative sense.

5. In the fifth category are questions designed to measure the intensity with which opinions are held. In general, the question or questions included for the purpose of revealing intensity fit into the pattern best after the specific issues have been posed, although they can be used after the open question if there is a particular reason for this.

Many different questions have been used in public opinion surveys to bring out intensity of feeling. Perhaps the one most often used is the question, "How strongly do you feel about this—very strongly, fairly strongly, or not at all strongly?"

The quintamensional plan can be applied without difficulty to almost any issue. Among those of national interest, the American Institute of Public Opinion has yet to find one which does not lend itself to the quintamensional approach.

The quintamensional plan is not the perfect solution to all problems met in the field of question design. Nor will it be argued that this plan should always be followed in public opinion polls. There are many occasions when it would be a needless waste of time and effort to use the five-way approach, and still other occasions when other question techniques are more useful.

An example of how this approach was applied in a practical situation is the issue of American aid to Greece. Shortly after the President's aid-to-Greece program was announced in March 1947, the Institute carried these questions on its ballot:

#### ISSUE : AID TO GREECE AND TURKEY

STEP 1.	)	Have you heard or read about President Truman's
Filter	)	speech to Congress asking for 400 million dollars
questions	)	to help Greece and Turkey?
	)	What do you think are the chief reasons for helping
	)	Greece and Turkey?
	)	What do you think are the chief reasons against
	)	helping Greece and Turkey?
<hr/>		
STEP 2.	)	What is your own feeling as to what we should do
Open	)	about this?
question	)	
<hr/>		
STEP 3.	)	Would you like to see your Congressman vote for
Dichotomous	)	or against the bill asking for \$250 million to aid
questions	)	Greece?
	)	Would you like to see your Congressman vote for
	)	or against the bill asking for \$150 million to aid
	)	Turkey?
<hr/>		
STEP 4.	)	
Reasons	)	Why do you feel this way?
why	)	
<hr/>		
STEP 5.	)	How strongly do you feel about this—very strongly,
Intensity	)	fairly strongly, or not at all strongly?

When the perennial issue of doing away with filibusters in Congress came up in 1947, the following questions were used to probe opinion on this problem:

#### ISSUE : FILIBUSTERS IN CONGRESS

STEP 1.	)	Will you tell me what a "filibuster in Congress"
Filter	)	means to you?
question	)	
<hr/>		
STEP 2.	)	What, if anything, should Congress do about fili-
Open	)	busters?
question	)	
<hr/>		
STEP 3.	)	It has been suggested that the Senate change its
Dichotomous	)	rules so that a simple majority can call for an end
question	)	to discussion, instead of a two-thirds majority as
	)	is now the case. Do you approve or disapprove of
	)	this change?

---

STEP 4.	)	
Reasons Why	)	Why do you feel this way?

---

STEP 5.	)	
Intensity	)	How strongly do you feel about this—very strongly, fairly strongly, or not at all strongly?

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Because the filter technique makes possible the exclusion of those who do not have any understanding of this issue, and say so, and because the tabulators can just as quickly exclude those who give a wrong response, opinions on any issue can be confined to those who have some idea of what the problem is.

### *Summary*

The quintamensional plan of question design provides a practical way for polling organizations to probe five aspects of public opinion on issues of the day. It answers the most frequently voiced criticism of those polling techniques which deal with questions.

Specifically, the quintamensional design makes possible the exclusion of all persons who, in the case of any given issue, "don't know what they're talking about." Through the use of filter or information questions, the opinions of persons representing all levels of knowledge on the issue can be ascertained. The opportunity to correlate opinions with the extent and type of information possessed by those included in the survey opens a new door to the study of factors which influence public opinion on important issues of the day.

Not only are the advantages of open questions and specific or dichotomous questions preserved in the design, but the inclusion of other points of reference which the design itself provides makes possible a more accurate interpretation of answers to both types of questions.

A more thorough probing of the reasons why persons hold the views they do is provided for in the design. And, lastly, evidence on the intensity with which majority and minority opinions are held is an integral part of the question-asking.

What is perhaps most important of all, information obtained from probing the five aspects of public opinion included in the quintamensional plan can all be intercorrelated, with a consequent wealth of data by which public opinion on any issue of the day can be described.

The quintamensional design need not be used on all occasions. But it is the belief of those who have employed it that it offers a method of surveying opinion on issues of the day which not only meets the practical requirements of public opinion polling organizations, but which makes possible a more complete and meaningful report of public opinion.

## 29

**“Who decides what questions shall be asked?  
Can anyone submit questions for polling?”**

Most of the questions asked in public opinion polls involve issues of current interest and importance.

The selection of questions, in the case of the American Institute of Public Opinion, is generally the function of the editorial staff of this organization. This group relies to a great extent upon suggestions made by editors of the newspapers which publish the results of the polls.

Some questions are suggested by members of Congress and heads of government agencies. A good many come from persons who are interested in certain issues.

In short, questions come from a wide variety of sources. If the public's views on these issues are of interest and importance, eventually they find a place on the ballot and in the reports.

The questions which are rejected are those which do not meet certain specifications. Typically, they are questions which are of interest only to a small sector of the population, questions on which the majority of people have not had a chance to formulate

opinions, or questions which require technical knowledge not possessed by the public.

## 30

“How is the actual wording of a question determined?”

TESTING questions—that is, actually trying them out on a limited number of carefully selected persons—before they appear on a ballot not only serves to eliminate questions on which a high proportion of voters have not enough information to have an opinion, but also to eliminate ambiguities and to simplify wordings.

Questions are pretested as many times as is necessary to make them lucid and free from bias. This means that a question may be reworded as many as six times or more before it is actually submitted in its final form to the national sample. In some instances as many as twenty-five to fifty different wordings have been tried out.

## 31

“How do you know that question wordings do not bias the result?”

EVERY effort is made, before a question actually appears on the ballot, to eliminate any possible bias. The question must first run the gantlet of a half dozen persons, all with different points of view, and then must actually meet all field tests.

But even these precautions do not always suffice. To detect bias a special technique has been built up in recent years to test ballot wordings.

If, after testing, there is still some doubt as to which of two

phrasings of a question should be used, these two are printed on different ballot forms, called "A" and "B." The "A" form goes to half of all voters in the cross section, the "B" form to the other half—both halves containing exactly comparable types of voters and each in itself constituting a complete and accurate cross section. Comparison of the results obtained from the two phrasings sent to the two cross sections reveals any influence or effect which may arise from the wording.

This technique, known as the "split ballot" technique, has proved to be a valuable device, not only for detecting flaws in question wording but for adding to the general knowledge in the field of question wording.

Further tests for bias are provided by interviewers in the field. These interviewers are requested to report any objections which respondents raise in regard either to the form or to the content of the question. If these interviewers find any question faulty, they report this fact, and either a new attempt is made to reword the question, or it is discarded.

Normally, then, every question on which results are reported in the press by the American Institute of Public Opinion has met four tests at as many different stages in its polling cycle:

First, it has been carefully worded and reworded by a staff experienced in the technique of simple and unbiased wording of questions.

Second, it has successfully met all requirements in actual test interviews before it appears on the ballot.

Third, it has met any split-ballot test which may have been indicated in the preballot testing.

Fourth, it has met the final test in the field with the public as reported by the interviewers.

## “Do variations in the wording of questions make a substantial difference in results?”

IF two questions convey the same meaning—and both are expressed in a strictly neutral manner—their variations in wording produce, normally, no significant difference in results.

When opinions are lightly held, when a question deals with a problem on which the public has little information and little interest, or where any condition exists that makes people particularly suggestible, then the way a question is worded is likely to influence the answers.

When issues are widely discussed and are highly controversial, when the public has taken definite sides, a wide variety of wording can be used and virtually the same results will be obtained from all of them.

Through the use of the “split ballot” technique, it has been possible to test different question wordings on hundreds of issues. The results of these studies, conducted on a nationwide basis and on issues of current importance, provide a great store of information not only upon the matter of question phrasing but upon the larger problem of the stability of opinion. The results of these many studies bear out the accuracy of a conclusion reported in the book *Gauging Public Opinion*: “Where people have standards of judgment resulting in stable frames of reference, the same answer is likely to be obtained irrespective of the way questions are asked.”

“Aren’t some people reluctant to be ticketed as holding an affirmative or negative view? Will they not want to qualify their answers?”

SOME persons wish to qualify their answers, because they cannot honestly or intelligently give an unequivocal “yes” or “no.” A few others are constitutionally unable to make up their minds and come to a decision on even the most simple issues.

Because of the existence of these two groups it is important to provide means by which qualifications can be registered and taken fully into account in the interpretation of results.

Even in straight categorical questions, calling for a “yes” or “no” answer, it is possible to record all qualifications by the mere addition of space on the ballot where interviewers can record any reservations on the part of the respondent. Sometimes these reservations are anticipated and answer boxes are put on the ballot, which read:

☐ Yes                      ☐ No                      ☐ No opinion

Qualified answer .....

“Is there any special order in which questions are asked?”

USUALLY there is little difference in results, regardless of where questions appear on the ballot. Questions which obviously would



condition the answer to succeeding questions are placed elsewhere on the ballot.

By reversing the order of questions on the two ballot forms in the split-ballot technique, it is possible to discover whether the order of questions has influenced results.

## 35

“Isn’t it possible to be unfair to certain groups by the kind and number of questions selected for surveys?”

One critic, writing in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, charged that polls were unfair to labor because in the period of time covered by his article (1940 to 1945) a great many more poll results unfavorable to labor had been reported than results favorable to labor.

Overlooked by the critic was the fact that in this period the number of proposals to curb various practices of labor far outnumbered the bills or proposals to extend labor’s gains of the previous decade.

The usual practice of polling organizations, in dealing with political problems, is to report opinion on those subjects which are widely discussed and which will probably come up for legislative action.

A charge of unfairness would make sense only if a polling organization deliberately chose not to survey opinion on those important and widely discussed proposals before Congress which represented the views of one of the opposing groups.

Eventually, a time may come when most proposals relating to labor-management problems will deal with curbs on management. If this situation should come about, the polls will undoubtedly

be charged by pro-management spokesmen with being partial to labor.

To follow any other policy than that now pursued by polling organizations would divert them from their primary purpose of reporting public opinion on issues of the day just as the press "covers" these same issues. The requirement that a poll favorable to a given cause be reported every time one unfavorable is published would lead to absurd complications. Carried to the extreme, it would have meant that every time survey results showed the public hostile to a Hitler, another survey had to be found which was favorable to him.

## 36

### "Why don't polling organizations make greater use of attitude scales?"

ALTHOUGH attitude scales were developed some twenty years ago, they have not, to date, proved very useful to polling organizations or to those research men whose task it is to predict human behavior, whether it be at the polling booth, the box office, or the cash register.

Some psychologists profess great faith in this type of approach to public opinion. Extensive experimenting has been carried on in classrooms and other restricted groups. This work may eventually lead to the development of techniques that are of practical use in general opinion polling. Thus far even the most ardent advocates have seldom ventured to apply the method outside the classroom.

# Interviewers and Interviewing Problems

## 37

“Who are the interviewers? How are they chosen?”

CHIEF requirements for an ideal interviewer are these: he must be conscientious, alert, open-minded. He should be well acquainted with the community in which he interviews. He must enjoy meeting and talking with people, for in the course of his work he must introduce himself to strangers in all walks of life, from the wealthiest to the poorest; and he must secure their co-operation in answering the ballot questions. He must also take an active and personal interest in the work he is doing. He must carry out his assignment exactly as planned by the poll taker and preserve the attitude of complete objectivity. In addition, he must be a good observer with ability to analyze, for he is often called upon to supplement formal interviews with informal reports as to what the people interviewed said, how they said it, and what their reactions were.

Most of the interviewers for the American Institute have attended college. Since interviewing requires only part of their time, nearly all have some full-time occupation.

Interviewers in a given community are selected on the recommendation of educators, lawyers, and others in responsible positions who know them personally and believe they meet the necessary requirements.

### “How reliable are the interviewers?”

EACH interviewer's work is carefully checked and analyzed by ballot analysts. Interviewers who do not meet rigid interviewing standards are promptly dropped from the field reporting staff. The accuracy of the polls reflects the reliability of the interviewers' work.

### “How many interviewers are used?”

THE field group which collects data for the polls of the American Institute of Public Opinion includes about 1,200 interviewers, located in carefully selected points throughout the United States.

There are interviewers in representative cities and towns in every state. All of the interviewers are not used on any one assignment, but, through a system of rotation, they are all brought into use. This system provides for greater geographical coverage. From 250 to 300 interviewers are used on any one Gallup Poll survey.

### “Do people like to be interviewed? How many persons refuse to be interviewed?”

BY AND large, a great majority of the people are flattered at being asked for their opinions, so seldom have they had the opportunity to express their views to someone in a way which they thought would count.

Interviewers rarely report that anyone has actually disliked

being interviewed. It may happen, of course, that a very busy person will be reluctant to take the time to be interviewed.

Usually the number of persons who refuse to be interviewed is less than ten per cent. Correct interviewing procedure is an important factor in keeping respondent refusals at a low point. The newly selected or inexperienced interviewer gets a higher proportion of "turn-downs" than more experienced interviewers. Often interviewers are able to interrogate as many as ninety-nine persons in every hundred approached.

## 41

"How much time does it take to complete a typical survey?"

IN THE United States a nationwide survey is normally completed in a period of about ten days. However, it is possible to complete a nationwide survey in a matter of hours, through use of the telegraph.

## 42

"Cannot the results be thrown off base because of prejudiced or biased interviewers? How do you know that interviewers who feel particularly strongly about some question do not select persons who have the same prejudice?"

IT IS to be expected that some interviewers will have strong convictions on many issues. The problem is to get such interviewers

to maintain an attitude of strict impartiality. But more important is the setting up of an interviewing situation in which any such bias has the least chance of operating.

If the interviewer were permitted to discuss at length with respondents the questions on the ballot, this bias on the part of the interviewer would almost certainly be revealed, and possibly would influence to some degree the answer given by the person interviewed. If the interviewer is not permitted this opportunity, but is required to read questions from a printed ballot exactly as they are printed, *without discussion or explanation*, the possibility of biasing the respondent's answers is virtually eliminated.

But even with this precaution, it is still important on occasion to know whether, as a matter of fact, the interviewer has biased the results. The work of any one interviewer can be compared with the work of any other interviewers, given similar assignments in similar or in neighboring communities. Any interviewer whose results differ widely from those of interviewers working in similar communities would obviously be suspect.

In addition, much can be learned about interviewer bias by checking the views of interviewers themselves. Thus, if interviewers with Democratic leanings find too high a proportion of persons who favor Democratic candidates, or interviewers with Republican leanings find too high a ratio favoring Republican candidates, their results are also suspect. This same type of analysis of possible interviewer bias can be conducted on any controversial point.

In an analysis made by Hadley Cantril, it was found that existing interviewer bias usually tends to cancel out, so that the over-all results are not affected significantly.

This factor continues to be an object of study. Progress has been made on this point through a better selection and training of interviewers.

“Isn’t it possible for an interviewer to sit at home and fill out ballots without ever actually doing the interviewing? What checks are made on the integrity and efficiency of the interviewer?”

No POLLING organization can afford to trust blindly all the interviewers it uses, no matter how carefully they have been selected. In the case of each interviewer, as soon as an assignment is returned, the ballots are thoroughly examined and rated for the care with which all comments have been recorded, answers filled in, and the assigned cross section followed.

*Simple and effective methods exist to detect dishonesty on the part of the interviewer.* This work of discovering the dishonest interviewer is now so perfected that it can be said, without qualification, that it is impossible for an interviewer who does not do his interviewing honestly and efficiently to continue as an interviewer.

“What is the procedure which an interviewer follows?”

AFTER an interviewer has been selected and has made some test interviews, he is sent an assignment asking him to interview a certain number of people, usually between ten and twenty-five. He is told to interview a certain number in each of four socio-economic groups in his community. Thus, if he is assigned to talk to four people on relief, he can choose any four people on

relief. The same is true, of course, of any other socio-economic group. Each assignment tells him how many men to interview, how many women, how many persons in each income level, how many farmers, if any, and so forth.

Toward the close of each interview, the interviewer obtains and records many facts about the person interviewed, including his occupation, general income level, whether he is white or colored, his age and educational attainment, whether he has a telephone, an automobile, and how he voted in the last national election. This information is all-important in making sure that the sample from each area meets all requirements of the cross section—in other words, that it is an accurate “miniature” of the population in that area.

## 45

“Are the same people interviewed more than once? Do you interview more than one member of a family?”

INTERVIEWERS are asked not to reinterview the same people more than once a year, in order to make certain that each cross section will be made up of different persons—but, of course, the same types of persons are interviewed.

The great advantage in this procedure lies in the fact that the size of any cross section can be increased by merely adding the same question on a subsequent ballot. Thus, when desirable, the size of the cross section reached in the course of three ballots will be three times the size of the cross section reached on any one ballot.

Interviewers are asked never to interview more than one member of a family on any one assignment. This helps to provide, obviously, for a wider cross section coverage.



## “Do you require interviewers to obtain names of persons they interview?”

No. Interviewers are not required to get names of persons they interview on a regular Gallup Poll assignment because it is felt that people express their true opinions more freely if they remain anonymous.

## “Why do polling organizations use interviewers? Why don't they use mail ballots?”

Most polls of early days were made by sending out post-card ballots. When an accurate check is made on the people who return or mail such ballots—and, more important, on the people who do *not* return them—mail-ballot polls can be useful. They are particularly adaptable to polling homogeneous groups. For example, a post-card poll of the people whose names are listed in *Who's Who* would yield virtually the same results as personal interviews with members of this same group.

The common fault of all mail ballots is that usually not more than twenty-five to thirty per cent of the people who get ballots bother to send them back. Moreover, pollers who rely solely on mail-ballot surveys seldom make an accurate check of those who do return them, in terms of their occupation, income, past political behavior, age, sex, and so on.

If the persons who returned the ballots constituted an accurate cross section of the whole group, then mail ballots could be employed in taking a poll; but since this is rarely the case, the raw results are almost always found to have a bias. In mail ballot tests conducted in the 1936, 1940, and 1944 elections it was

found, for example, that people in the higher income levels were much more likely to return their ballots than people in the lower income levels. This fact constantly biases the results in the direction of the views of the higher income levels.

## 48

### “What are the relative advantages of a large versus a small number of interviewers?”

THERE is no ideal size for an interviewing group. It all depends upon the job to be done. In most polling operations the advantages of a large number of interviewers are readily apparent. Reports on accurate cross sections of smaller units, such as states, would be impossible without a large group. Also, use of a large number of interviewers tends to lessen the chances that political or other biases on the part of some interviewers will affect the results.

A small number of interviewers can be selected and handled more carefully, and, for certain types of opinion sampling, have an advantage over larger staffs.

# Polling Accuracy

49

“To what extent are election returns a guide to polling accuracy?”

THE public will probably continue to judge the accuracy of polls chiefly by election returns. For this reason those who conduct polls must be content, rightly or wrongly, to be judged by their election forecasts. But election returns, it should be emphasized, are by no means a perfect measure of the accuracy of public opinion polling techniques.

Election returns are affected by many extraneous factors which have little or nothing to do with the true reflection of the public's views regarding candidates or issues. The weather, corruption on the part of election officials, and the efficiency of political machines in getting their members to the polls, all have an important influence on election returns.

For example, bad weather which keeps farmers from voting would, in elections of recent years, reduce the number of Republican votes cast, because outside the southern states, farmers tend to be more Republican than their city cousins. Corruption has tended to decline with the years, but nevertheless is still present in some cities. Again, it is entirely possible that in a very close race a dramatic last-minute statement or a change of views on the part of one candidate might alter the views of the electorate at a time too late to be measured by any polling organization before election day. Still another extraneous factor which cannot be taken into account by those who conduct polls, and yet which can and does affect election results, is party effort on election day. If one party makes a far greater effort to get its followers to balloting places, poll results obviously are thrown off

to this extent. Activity of this sort may be equally effective if operated by some organization other than one of the parties—witness the work of the CIO-PAC in 1944 in educating voters and encouraging them to vote.

Most of these sources of error would be eliminated if a nation required every citizen, on penalty of fine or imprisonment, to cast his ballot. Such a law does exist in Australia. But in the United States in 1940, the last presidential election before the war, the vote was less than 50 million or only five-eighths of the 80 million adult citizens. Elections for Congressmen in off-years attract even fewer voters—34 million in 1946. Elections in some Congressional districts to fill unexpired terms have attracted less than 10 per cent of the eligible voters!

When a considerable number of voters stay away from polling booths on election day, the question inevitably arises as to whether those who do take the trouble to vote represent accurately the views of those who do not.

When the size of the voting group declines to any considerable extent, polling organizations run into a new source of error; for, in addition to the normal error which arises in dividing voters between candidates, or between those who favor and those who oppose a given issue, poll results are subject to a second error which arises from the attempt to determine who will and who will not vote.

If persons who vote were always a perfect sample of the whole—if their views agreed exactly with those who do not vote—this source of error would not exist. The poll prediction would be an accurate forecast since it would be based upon a perfect sample of a perfect sample. But the sample represented by those who vote is rarely a true sample. There is much evidence to prove that those who do go to the polls seldom represent accurately the political views of those who stay away.

Although an error in this kind of election situation certainly has little to do with the accuracy of polls in determining the views of the *entire electorate* on any given issue or on candidates,

# GENERAL EDUCATION

nevertheless it is a problem which must be solved in order to keep the confidence of the public in polling accuracy.

Much experimental work has been done on the problem of determining who will and who will not vote in a given election, and it can be confidently predicted that ways will be found in the future to reduce the error arising from this factor of turn-out.

## 50

“Polls often refer to a ‘margin of error.’ What is meant by this term and just how great is this margin?”

BECAUSE all poll results are based on samples, their findings are always subject to a margin of error. If a poll makes an absolutely perfect prediction, this feat can be put down to a combination of good work and good luck. There are a number of factors that can contribute to polling error, but even so, carefully and competently conducted polls have in recent years had only a small margin of error, a large part of which has been attributable to probable error to be expected in view of the size of the samples used.

From a theoretical point of view, the more cases or interviews drawn from a true cross section, the greater the possibilities of an accurate prediction. But it should be emphasized that we are dealing here with probabilities.

To be specific. From a purely theoretical standpoint, the chances are even that as few as 100 cases drawn from a perfect cross section will be sufficient to predict what many millions of voters will do on an issue that divides in sentiment, say, 60-40, with a probable error attributable to the size of the sample of 3.3 per cent. This means that half the time the error will be less than 3.3 per cent, but it also means that the other half of the

time it will be more than 3.3 per cent. And, of course, there is at least a fairly strong possibility that the error will be substantially larger. Most polling organizations would not be content to have so wide a margin of error, when, by the addition of a few hundred or a few thousand cases, this error can be greatly reduced.

Again to be specific. The theoretical chances are 95 in 100 that the error will be held within a margin of 2.2 per cent when the number of cases reaches 2,000. It should be noted that this means that 95 times in every 100 the error will be 2.2 per cent or less, but that 5 times in 100, on the average, it is likely to be *more* than 2.2 per cent.

Error due solely to the size of the sample can be reduced to a practical minimum by increasing the number of cases to 10,000. Then the probabilities are 997 in 1,000 that any error arising solely from the size of the sample will not be greater than 1.5 per cent. Or, to state this fact another way: there are only 3 chances in 1,000 that the error will be greater than 1.5 per cent. Should the error in poll results be greater than this amount, then the amount of error in excess of 1.5 per cent must normally be ascribed to a faulty cross section, to the time element, or to other sources of error described elsewhere.

## 51

### “What is the record of polls in their election surveys?”

UP to the time of this writing, the American Institute of Public Opinion has made 197 pre-election surveys since it was organized in 1935. The Institute also has on file the records of 141 election forecasts made in this country by other polling organizations operating on a nationwide or statewide basis and 54 elec-

tion predictions made by the Australian, Brazilian, British, Canadian, Danish, Finnish, French, and Swedish Institutes, all members of the International Association of Public Opinion Institutes.

Of these 392 elections, 71 were forecast with an error of 1 per cent or less, 118 with an error of 2 per cent or 3 per cent, or a total of 189 with an error of 3 per cent or less; 117 were between 3 per cent and 6 per cent; 64 were between 6 per cent and 10 per cent; and 22 were over 10 per cent.

The mean average error of these 392 predictions is 3.9 per cent. The average for the American Institute of Public Opinion is 3.9 per cent, and for Gallup Poll foreign affiliates it is 3.6 per cent.

Some indication of the progress that is being made in polling accuracy can be gained from an analysis of the error registered in the period between 1936 and 1940, in the period from 1940 to 1944, and in the period from 1944 to and including 1947. Here are the figures:

PERIOD	NUMBER OF ELECTIONS	MEAN AVERAGE ERROR FOR PERIOD	MEAN AVERAGE ERROR ALL ELECTIONS TO END OF PERIOD
1936-Oct. 1940	136	5.6%	5.6%
Nov. 1940-Oct. 1944	109	3.4%	4.6%
Nov. 1944-Dec. 1947	147	2.9%	3.9%
TOTAL	392	3.9%	3.9%

In 1944 the Institute's error for its national forecast was 1.8 per cent; its average state-by-state error for the 48 states was 2.5 per cent.

Two facts emerge from the study of the accuracy of modern polling techniques in making election forecasts.

The first of these is that in the case of polling organizations

that have made ten or more predictions, either here or abroad, the average error is virtually the same.

The second conclusion—and perhaps the more important—is that polling accuracy has definitely improved over the period of the last twelve years. But, due to the many factors beyond the control of any research organization, the amount of improvement which can be expected today, or in the future, is definitely limited. While it obviously can be only a guess, it can be said that polling accuracy during the next decade will probably not fall below an average error of 2 per cent.

## 52

“Granted that polls can make accurate forecasts on elections, what proof is there that the figures reported on issues maintain the same accuracy?”

IN THE great majority of instances in which the American Institute (and the polling organizations in other countries affiliated with it) reports the division of sentiment on any issue, the figures can be interpreted as a forecast of the division of opinion which would result if the same question were put to *the entire electorate in a nationwide plebiscite or referendum*.

The problem of polling on issues is essentially the same as the problem of polling on candidates. The same polling procedures are used on both candidates and issues. On some issues the “no opinion” vote is high, but so, likewise, is it in many elections on candidates, if one counts as “no opinion” the persons who fail to go to the polls.

It is generally safe to assume that the people who are interested in an issue are the people who would vote on that issue in



a plebiscite or referendum, just as the people who are interested in an election are usually the people who take the trouble to vote.

Proof that the same accuracy is attained on issues as on candidates is to be found in actual instances when issues have been voted upon by the public. Many weeks before the Canadian government held its plebiscite in 1942 on the question of whether or not the government should have a free hand in selecting methods for increasing the armed forces for overseas service, the Canadian Institute reported Canadian sentiment accurately on this issue. Later, when the Canadian government actually decided to hold a national plebiscite on this issue, the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion correctly forecast the outcome of the election. The error for the country was 5.0 per cent.

During 1945-1946, the French Institute of Public Opinion forecast the national vote on four different proposals having to do with the adoption of a new constitution. The average error was 3.7 per cent.

Australian public opinion polls during 1946-1947 forecast the vote on four referenda, of which three were national and one for the State of New South Wales. For these four referenda the average error was 3.9 per cent.

Taking all of the referenda or similar public issues for which predictions have been made by the Gallup Poll or affiliated organizations abroad, the average error is 4.8 per cent, which compares with an average error of 3.9 per cent for the contests where polls of this organization made predictions on vote for candidates.

Obviously, it is impossible in most instances to check the accuracy of a poll report by means of an official election; but this doesn't mean that there is *no way whatsoever* of judging whether the report reflects public thinking. Before the day of public opinion polls there were any number of indirect ways by which the broad outline of public opinion could be ascertained, and these ways still remain in existence. What public opinion polls have done has been to substitute a more objective, more detailed, and

more immediate appraisal of public opinion. One practical test that cannot be escaped is whether or not polls have been a good guide to the subsequent behavior of the public. The fact that month after month polls do anticipate Congressional action and other legislative action or executive measures offers at least some indirect proof of their accuracy.

At some future time it may be possible by official or semiofficial sampling referenda to check on the accuracy of poll reports on issues. The American Institute of Public Opinion has suggested a method by which Congress, or any other group, could undertake such a referendum at a very small cost. This plan is described at length elsewhere in this book.

## 53

“Is there any way by which a group can check polling results? Suppose a political party believes that figures reported regarding public opinion are inaccurate or biased in respect to issues affecting it. Is there anything it can do about finding out?”

THERE is no monopoly on polling or upon knowledge of polling. Any group which believes that polling results are somehow unfair always has an opportunity to submit its case to an independent polling organization or to an impartial group of technicians in this field, to satisfy itself as to the truth or accuracy of the results of any polling organization.

# Election Predictions

54

“What chance is there that polls will make wrong forecasts?”

JUST as it can be said with certainty that polls will be highly accurate in the vast majority of elections, so with the same certainty it can be said that on occasion they will go wrong. But when they do go wrong, they still should be reasonably close to the mark, if the best practices have been followed.

In thinking of poll accuracy, the terms “right” and “wrong” are wholly inadequate for describing *how* right or *how* wrong a poll is in a given election. Thus, a poll might be “wrong” in naming the winner, yet be within one half of one per cent of the true division of the vote. In short, the accuracy of polls in a scientific sense should be judged solely on *how closely they predict the actual division of votes* on candidates, or the division of opinion on issues. The correct prediction of a winner, but with an error of fifteen per cent, should be regarded as an exceptionally poor forecast; whereas a wrong prediction of one or two per cent should, in a strictly scientific sense, be regarded as a good prediction, even if the winner was not correctly forecast.

The outcome of a national election might be determined by an extremely small number of votes, as in the case of the 1916 election. Polling machinery has not reached, and probably never will reach, the degree of accuracy necessary to forecast an election which is decided by fewer votes than the margin of error under which a poll operates. Since this margin of error averages about two to three per cent, under the best conditions, it is evident that unless a candidate gets 53 per cent or more of the two-party

vote, his victory in terms of popular votes cannot be forecast with complete certainty.

One of the things which experience has taught all polling organizations is that accurate predictions of the division of the votes in the electoral college is an almost impossible feat. The reason for this is plain. Theoretically, at least, a mere ten votes out of a total of 30,000,000 cast in the ten largest states could change a total of 249 of the 531 electoral votes of the country. To measure political sentiment with this degree of accuracy would require methods with the precision of the finest tools used in the physical sciences.

In the 1944 Presidential election, Ohio, with its 25 electoral votes, could not have been placed in the right column unless the polling organization could achieve an accuracy of two-tenths of one per cent! In fact, a total of 165 electoral votes in this election were represented by states where a change of two per cent of the vote would put the 165 electoral votes in a different column.

## 55

### “Why did the ‘Literary Digest’ poll of 1936 go wrong?”

EVEN in the days when the *Literary Digest* straw-vote polls were widely quoted as being “amazingly accurate,” they never achieved the state-by-state accuracy of present-day polls. In 1936 the methods which had previously proved accurate were responsible for an error of 19 percentage points in the *Digest* prediction of the division of the popular vote.

The reasons the *Digest* poll went wrong in 1936 are obvious to anyone who understands modern polling methods. The *Literary Digest* sent out its ballots by mail and, for the most part, to people whose names were listed in telephone directories or to

lists of automobile owners. From the point of view of cross sections this was a major error, because it limited the sample largely to the upper half of the voting population, as judged on an economic basis. Roughly 40 per cent of all homes in the United States had telephones and some 55 per cent of all families owned automobiles. These two groups, which largely overlap, constituted roughly the upper half or upper three-fifths, economically, of the voting population.

The *Literary Digest* in previous straw-vote polls had sent post-card ballots to the same groups, but the *Digest* did not reckon with two factors in 1936—the division of votes along income lines which began with Roosevelt's administration in 1932, and the substantial increase in the voting population which took place between 1932 and 1936. These new voters came predominantly from the poorest levels—from income groups which favored Roosevelt.

The *Digest* not only failed to select a proper cross section, but the means by which the magazine reached voters—mail ballots—also helped to introduce error into the findings. Persons most likely to return mail ballots are those in the higher income and educational levels, and, conversely, those least likely to return their ballots represent the lowest income and educational levels. So, even if the *Literary Digest* had actually used lists of voters throughout the country as they did in a few cities, instead of names selected from telephone books and automobile lists, post-card ballots would still have been responsible for a substantial error in the *Digest's* findings.

The time factor also contributed to the *Digest's* downfall. The great bulk of ballots sent out were mailed in September. It was, therefore, impossible to catch any change or trend in sentiment taking place during the last two months of the campaign.

In many elections, in fact in most, no trend develops during the course of a campaign toward either candidate. But in some elections there is such a change in sentiment and, therefore, poll-

ing must be so timed as to measure this trend from week to week, right up to election day.

The fact that the *Digest* was using faulty methods was obvious long before the election revealed them. As early as July 14, 1936, two months before the *Digest* even began sending out its ballots, the American Institute, through its member papers, predicted almost exactly the *Digest's* final figure and described in detail exactly what was wrong with the *Digest's* procedures.

Today it is unthinkable that in any national election a modern polling organization could make an error as great as that registered by the *Literary Digest* in 1936; for that matter, it is highly improbable that an error *half* as great as that of the *Literary Digest* could be made by modern polling procedures. This is true because modern polls pay great attention to the selection of the cross section. Returns are carefully checked to discover the extent to which they are unrepresentative. Moreover polling organizations are aware of the great importance of the time factor and, for this reason, usually insist upon polling almost up to the day of election.

## 56

“Can barometer areas be used instead of cross sections of the voting population for polling purposes?”

AS POINTED out earlier, sampling may be done by taking a few interviews from a large number of localities, or it may be done by more intensive work in a smaller number of localities. Perhaps the most extreme development of the latter method is the “barometer area” procedure. Such barometer areas may be selected because politically they have accurately mirrored the entire country for some time, or they may be selected because they represent the major population groups in correct proportions.

Since these barometer areas are extensive it is not necessary to interview everyone. Accurate poll results have been obtained by interviewing every fourth, fifth, or tenth person. Some counties have been reliable political barometers for the nation over a period of many years. There always comes a time, of course, when a county which has accurately revealed nationwide trends for decades, ceases, for one reason or another, to be an accurate indicator of opinion in a particular election.

Prior to 1940, the five counties of the United States which could lay claim to being the best barometer counties were Erie County, Ohio; Bay County, Michigan; Allen County, Indiana; Summit County, Utah; and Sheridan County, Wyoming. In the 1940 election, for the first time in many years, Erie County, Ohio, and Allen County, Indiana, lost their status as barometer counties by giving large margins to the Republican candidate. In previous elections these two counties had voted almost exactly as the nation voted. This is the eventual fate of all barometer counties.

But the fact that barometer counties do not in all elections and at all times prove to be completely accurate barometers of public opinion should not be taken to mean that a system which employs barometer counties cannot be accurate. The problem is simply one of getting a sufficient number of barometer counties to take advantage of the law of averages. Thus a sample based on the best barometer counties in all sections of the country would almost invariably produce an accurate prediction.

This system of arriving at an estimate of public opinion has been used, in a practical sort of way, by some political observers for many years. The late William Allen White, for example, once claimed that all he had to do to find out what the American people were thinking was to "get into my car and drive out to Clay Township and talk to the folks." Basically, this idea is right, provided that not one Clay Township, but fifty or a hundred Clay Townships, are properly polled. However, the records

of these Clay Townships must be carefully scrutinized. It isn't enough that they be good in one election or even in two or three.

## 57

“Is it not true that many politicians and many political observers can forecast results as accurately as polls can?”

ALTHOUGH some politicians and political observers will make accurate predictions in certain elections, their record *over a period of years* will not stand comparison with the record of polling organizations.

In making comparisons it should always be borne in mind that the job of the two is not exactly the same. Those in charge of polling organizations are chiefly concerned with *correctly forecasting the division of votes*; whereas both political observers and politicians are more concerned with picking winners.

Examination of the forecasts of some of the leading political observers of the country indicates many evidences of wishful thinking. Their best records for accuracy are invariably made when the election returns run in the direction of their own personal views. When the trend is in the opposite direction, when the party with which they are identified is badly defeated, they seldom gauge the extent of the defeat correctly.

A study of the private views of candidates for office indicates that they are invariably on the optimistic side. Even the most astute campaign managers are likely to delude themselves regarding their chances in an election race.

As polling procedures are improved, politicians and political observers will lean more and more heavily upon poll findings. In fact, the day of the political prophet—the man who can sit back



in his office and give an accurate forecast based on telephone conversations with county chairmen—is definitely past.

This does not mean that the prophets won't be more nearly right, from time to time, than polling organizations. Anyone, even if he has no knowledge whatever of the facts of a campaign, has at least a 50-50 chance of making a better prediction than any one polling organization. For example, if a polling organization says that candidate "A" will get 56 per cent, anybody can choose a figure one per cent above or one per cent under this figure and have almost an even chance of being more nearly right than the polling organization.

## 58

“Some newspapers print ballots in their pages.  
Is this a good way to get opinion?”

THIS procedure has the same basic fault as any mail questionnaire or post-card ballot. The number of persons who fill out and return a ballot printed in a newspaper is normally only a small part of the total number of persons reached by a newspaper. Those who fill out a ballot may or may not be representative of all the other readers of the paper. Actually, the evidence points convincingly to the fact that the people who send in to the newspaper such ballots usually are *not* representative of all readers.

# Interpretation and Reporting of Results

59

“It is axiomatic that statistics and figures can always be interpreted in many conflicting ways. What guarantee does the public have that this interpretation will be objective?”

POLLING organizations can gain acceptance only by maintaining a position of complete impartiality. The interpreter of poll results obviously has certain latitude, but unlike writers in other fields, he must, by common practice, give the evidence on which he has based his conclusions. This evidence includes the question put to the public, and a report of the results.

Readers are, therefore, always in a position to draw their own conclusions and to challenge those drawn by the poll reporter. By way of contrast, this situation seldom obtains in the interpretation of news events, for the simple reason that the public seldom has all of the facts from which the writer has drawn his interpretations or conclusions, and is, therefore, in no position to challenge their accuracy.

Poll results can be interpreted by readers in any way they see fit. Thus, in the period prior to America's entrance into the war, isolationists could point out that the great majority of the public was against the immediate entrance of the United States into the war. These isolationists could ignore the fact that a sizable majority of the public was in favor of getting into the war rather than see England defeated. Interventionists, on the other hand, could argue, simply, that the public, by a good majority, was

willing to come to England's aid by pointing out that the time had come when England would lose the war unless we did join forces with her. What was ignored in both arguments was the question of time and the question of whether or not England had reached the point where her defeat was probable without our entering the war on her side.

For these reasons, the intelligent reader, in reading poll results, will give particular attention to three things: (1) the question asked; (2) the results obtained; (3) the time factor.

The person whose task it is to report poll results normally tries to give the reader the necessary background material and to tie the poll into current or future events. At times he may be guilty unconsciously of overemphasis, or of failure to give enough background material or to include sufficient qualifications arising from the poll itself. But at some point a balance must be struck between a full scientific presentation of the facts and a simple and concise report of the results of the survey on a given issue.

## 60

“Aside from reporting the number of people who vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘no opinion,’ is it possible to interpret and report poll results so as to shed greater light on the public’s thinking on a given issue? In short, is it possible to describe public opinion as well as to report it?”

GREAT progress is being made in describing public opinion more fully. There is a general recognition on the part of polling organizations that it is not enough merely to report how many

people vote "yes" or "no" on a question, but that any material which sheds light on *why* people vote as they do contributes greatly to the knowledge of public opinion.

Complete understanding of the public's attitudes on any given issue necessarily involves information on the following five points: (1) the public's information on the issue; (2) the public's interest in the issue; (3) the division of opinion; (4) the reasons people have for voting as they do; (5) the intensity of opinion.

## 61

"Isn't it a fact that people who have not made up their minds on any issue actually hold the balance of power, since they may at any time rally to one side and tip the scale in its favor?"

THE importance of people who have no opinion on an issue has been a matter of debate since the time when sampling procedures were first applied to the measurement of public opinion. It was an issue which did not arise during the straw vote or post-card poll era for the very simple reason that the people who returned their cards were the ones who had opinions, or they were given no opportunity by the conductor of the straw poll to vote other than "yes" or "no."

Likewise, the "no opinion" vote is given no attention in elections, since obviously election returns are concerned only with the people who voted. There is no place on the official ballot to mark "no opinion." Thus, in the last presidential election, results by states, by smaller units, and by the nation were reported simply in terms of actual votes cast. In November 1944, Dewey got 46 per cent of all major party votes, Roosevelt 54 per cent.

You will look in vain for any figure reporting the number of people who didn't vote, which presumably includes a substantial proportion of the people who had no opinion.

Since in an election of any kind it is the people *with opinions*—no matter how small their number—who decide the issue, and not the people who have no opinion, a good case can be made for reporting only the vote of those people who have opinions. The people who “haven't given any thought” to a problem, who “don't know enough about it to have an opinion,” who “don't care what happens,” have little or no effect upon the formulation of national policy and probably should be excluded in the reporting of public opinion on a given issue.

The size of this group may be of interest, but public opinion measurement, by its very nature, must be concerned primarily with those who have opinions. There are, of course, some people who have opinions, but who, after weighing arguments pro and con, can honestly say that the two sides are so evenly balanced that it is impossible to make a decision one way or another. When critics speak of the “no opinion” vote, they are thinking usually of this small group. A few persons refuse to reach conclusions until they have made a careful and exhaustive study of an issue. Some are afraid even then to come to a definite decision. But, fortunately or unfortunately, the great mass of people who determine public policy in a democracy are not so meticulous.

On almost any issue which does not have a direct effect upon the whole population—such questions as relief, old-age pensions, and the like—those who say they have no opinion are likely to be persons at the low end of the education scale. In fact, it is axiomatic that on most national issues the “no opinion” vote increases directly with the lack of education, which in turn is closely correlated with lack of interest and lack of information.

Generally, the critics who place great emphasis upon the “no opinion” vote think of this group as being made up largely of persons who are waiting for further facts or details before making up their minds. Actually, the group is normally made up in

large part of those who haven't given any thought to the issue in question and, moreover, probably never will.

## 62

“Do newspapers report your findings just as they get them?”

NEWSPAPERS typically report the results of American Institute surveys as they do any other news. If there is great interest in the subject, they may give the poll more prominence than they would if they believed the report to hold little interest for their readers.

In all the years in which the Institute has been sending its reports to newspapers in the United States, no single instance has come to light of a newspaper which deliberately altered any of the facts in a release.

## 63

“Are all the polls which you take reported?”

RESULTS of some polls are unreported because faults not detected in preliminary tests come to light when the questions are put to the general public. Use of the split-ballot technique may also reveal weaknesses or biases in question wording.

Often the turn of events makes polls taken on a given subject of little interest or significance by the time results are in and ready to report.

Chiefly for these reasons, some poll results are not released to newspapers.

# Significance of Public Opinion Poll Results

64

“What do you mean by ‘public opinion?’”

A WORKING definition of *public opinion* has been provided by James Bryce. Bryce regarded public opinion as the “*aggregate* of the views men hold regarding matters that affect or interest the community.”

Floyd Allport in the first issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* gave this more precise and scholarly definition :

“The term *public opinion* is given its meaning with reference to a multi-individual situation in which individuals are expressing themselves, or can be called upon to express themselves, as favoring or supporting (or else disfavoring or opposing) some definite condition, person, or proposal of widespread importance, in such a proportion of number, intensity, and constancy, as to give rise to the probability of affecting action, directly or indirectly, toward the object concerned.”

65

“The average person is pretty uninformed. Most people don’t know what they are talking about. So, how could their views on any public issue have any possible significance?”

DEMOCRACY doesn’t require that every man be a political philosopher. It requires merely that the *sum total of individual views*

*add up to something that makes sense.* That the views of the majority generally do "make sense" can be judged by examining the results of polls on hundreds of issues.

Surprisingly few persons are completely informed on even a single issue and not until the millennium is reached will every voter be well informed on every matter of public importance.

In a democracy such as ours the incontrovertible fact remains that the *majority* of citizens usually registers sound judgment on issues, even though a good many are ignorant and uninformed. Gladstone once observed:

"I painfully reflect that in almost every political controversy of the last fifty years, the *leisured* classes, the *titled* classes have been in the wrong. The common people—the toilers, the men of uncommon sense—these have been responsible for nearly all the social reform which the world accepts today."

A member of the law faculty at the University of California, Max Radin, analyzed the popular vote in California, on 115 referendum propositions put before the people in state elections between 1936 and 1946. He found that in a substantial majority of cases the voters took the same attitude toward the propositions as was taken by two of California's conservative institutions, the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco and the Town Hall of Los Angeles, after extensive study of the issues by their legislative committees. Dr. Radin concludes from the evidence of these 115 referenda that the voters not only displayed caution and good judgment but that they rejected crackpot suggestions with greater firmness than their elected representatives in the state legislature. He says: "One thing is clear. The vote of the people is eminently sane. The danger apprehended that quack-nostrums in public policy can be forced on the voters by demagogues is demonstrably non-existent. The representative legislature is much more susceptible to such influences."



## “Don’t polls oversimplify complicated issues?”

THE chief objection to polls on the part of some critics is that they tend to oversimplify complex problems and, since few problems of the world are really simple, this group resists the idea that much good can come of polling the nonexperts on any issue.

Oversimplification is a fault, but overcomplication is a weakness of equal proportion. Certainly, if the complexity of a problem were the final test of whether the public had a right to an opinion, there would be little place for the average man in any type of government. Everything would be left to the experts. But to any student of government the fact will be apparent that virtually every important issue involves certain fundamental questions of policy, which usually are basically simple in nature. They are simple because typically they involve questions of value or ends. And only the people can and should pass finally upon these.

It is with these questions that polling organizations are largely concerned. Even in matters as complex as warfare, public opinion can never be entirely ignored. Bernard Brodie, in his book, *A Guide to Naval Strategy*, points out:

“The idea persists that strategy can be comprehensible only to people who wear uniforms. Yet for better or worse, the layman plays a great part in determining the military strategy of a nation. In a democracy during wartime he rightly insists upon speaking his mind, and he probably underestimates the degree to which military and political leaders respond to his demands. His very optimism or despondency creates situations which the authorities cannot afford to ignore. Prior to the outbreak of war he elects to office politicians whose policies may either further

or hopelessly compromise the nation's security, or at least greatly affect the price of victory.

"I should be loathe, however, to leave the impression that civilian influence upon the determination of strategy is in any sense regrettable. Clemenceau had good enough reasons for his famous statement that 'War is too important to be left to the generals.' The greatest generals have themselves expressed that very opinion. Everyone is familiar with the dictum of Clausewitz that war is a continuation of politics, but its implications are not so generally recognized. Yet we have on the authority of that great philosopher of war himself just what he meant by it.

" 'To leave a great military enterprise,' he said, 'or the plan for one, to a *purely military judgment and decision* is a distinction which cannot be allowed . . . and when people speak, as they often do, of the prejudicial influence of policy [i.e. politicians] on the conduct of a war, they say in reality something very different from what they intend. It is not this influence, but the policy itself which should be criticized.'

" 'For a democracy, the corollary of that idea can be best expressed in the words of Captain Russell Grenfell of the British Navy. 'Though the Government may often be forced by the exigencies of the case to come to vital decisions concerning the conduct of war without previously taking the public into its confidence . . . it will be greatly strengthened in making these decisions if it can feel that it has behind it an instructed public opinion on strategical matters ; a public opinion which is capable of forming a just and reliable estimate of the soundness or otherwise of the strategy adopted as it is seen to develop.' "

" One interesting example of Brodie's thesis is to be found in the public's views on air power. As early as 1935, when many military experts had great doubts about the importance of air power, the public was overwhelmingly of the opinion that this branch of the armed services should be strengthened. Moreover, at this early date they were willing to pay greater taxes to build

up all branches of the services, but in particular they were of the belief that the air branch should be developed.

## 67

“Isn’t there a great difference between public opinion and private opinion? Don’t people tell an interviewer one thing for public consumption, reserving to themselves an entirely different opinion which might best be described as private opinion?”

AN UNWARRANTED distinction is often drawn between “public opinion” and “private opinion.” Obviously, there are some opinions which people are reluctant to express to their closest friends, much less to strangers. In short, there are obviously many private opinions on private affairs with which public opinion polls have not been and probably never will be concerned.

Public opinion polls are concerned, by their very nature, with public issues. Or, to put it another way, they are concerned with *private opinions on public issues*. Every time a voter enters a polling booth he is recording a private and secret opinion on a public issue or on candidates. If there were any marked differences between public and private opinions, on public issues, then polls could never predict accurately the outcome of any election.

From a practical point of view, the only question that has to be answered is this: If an election should involve an issue on which people are reluctant to talk, would polling results produce an accurate forecast?

It would be foolish to assume that such an issue will never arise. In 1937, at a time when all broadcasting chains and virtu-

ally all newspapers had a complete prohibition on the discussion of social diseases and, in fact, barred even the mention of syphilis and gonorrhea, interviewers for the Institute found people willing and even eager to talk about these social problems and ready to voice their opinions on measures which should be taken to control them. The results of these polls were published in all Institute newspapers and they anticipated the action of many state legislatures in their adoption of control programs. Likewise, the poll correctly forecast the results of a study made by the Surgeon General's office in Chicago when people were asked by secret ballot to express their views on a control program in that city.

The interesting fact is that even on the most intimate subjects—questions of religion and sex—the vast majority of people show little reluctance to speak their minds provided they are interrogated skillfully.

One of the most significant studies ever undertaken in this country by a social scientist concerns the sexual behavior of normal individuals. The study is being directed by Professor A. C. Kinsey of Indiana University, under a grant by the National Research Council. Professor Kinsey has obtained all his information through the use of interviewers who gather the most intimate details regarding the sex history of each person whom they interview. Persons in all walks of life have been included in the study, and the volume of startling information that has been obtained should be enough to convince the most skeptical critic that "private" opinions on strictly private matters can be obtained successfully if the right interviewing procedures are followed.

From the point of view of the day-to-day operations of polling organizations, more important than this presumed reluctance on the part of people to talk about certain subjects is the problem of controlling what is technically known to researchers as the "prestige" factor. This problem stems from the human desire to put one's best foot forward—in short to report one's

tastes, one's motives, one's interests at a higher level than they actually are.

This problem arises only in connection with certain issues and normally is not present in the great bulk of controversial public questions covered by polling organizations.

The presence or absence of "prestige" can be detected by modern research procedures. One of the most practical methods is the use of the secret ballot. If there is a substantial difference between the results obtained by face-to-face interviews and those obtained when persons polled are requested to mark secret ballots, there is every reason to suspect the presence of the prestige factor.

By questioning persons as to the *kind* of people who are for or against a candidate, for or against a proposal, it is often possible to detect the presence of prestige. If the "better" people, the more "intelligent," the more "loyal" are found to favor predominantly one side as against the other, there is need to take precautionary measures.

## 68

"Don't people merely give snap opinions or judgments? Don't they say one thing to-day and something else tomorrow?"

IT WOULD be foolish to assume that every view expressed by a person to an interviewer represents his final and considered judgment on the question put to him.

But upon examination, few opinions on widely debated issues of the day can justly be described as "snap" opinions, even though such opinions may be expressed for the first time to a poll interviewer. Opinions on most subjects are a product of factors reaching far back into the life of the individual. They are

closely and consistently related to hundreds of other opinions, as any number of "omnibus" opinion studies have discovered.

And even though John Smith may hold a different opinion tomorrow morning from the one he holds today, that makes little difference in a public opinion poll. By their very nature, such polls rely on the "law of averages." For every John Smith who changes his views in one direction, a Henry Jones may change his in the opposite direction. The end result is unaffected by this shifting on the part of individuals within the sample.

Were this not the case, poll results would differ greatly from week to week, or from day to day, for that matter. But, as has been pointed out in preceding pages, the opinions of a large sample remain surprisingly constant. Public opinion changes slowly and usually only under the impact of important events.

Even when the views of the various individuals making up a sample are studied, consistency in their views is found, as evidenced by any number of "panel" studies. In these studies the same persons are reinterviewed at later dates, normally without their prior knowledge. If opinions were of the "snap" variety, changes would be recorded in the views of many individuals included in the panel. Such is not found to be true. When changes have occurred, definite reasons usually can be ascribed for these changes and a trend is revealed.

# Polling and the Processes of Democracy

69

“Don’t polls start ‘band wagon’ movements?  
Aren’t polls harmful in that they not only  
report but influence election results?”

THE band-wagon theory is one of the oldest delusions of politics. It is a time-honored custom for candidates in an election to announce that they are going to win. The misconception under which these politicians labor is that a good many people will vote for a man, regardless of their convictions, just to be able to say that they voted for the winner.

There may have been a time in American political life when people cared so little about political issues or about candidates that the mere pleasure of telling their friends that they supported the winner was enough to make them vote for him. But in recent years no objective evidence has been found to support the contention that poll predictions influence voters. And there is a mountain of evidence to the contrary.

Those who conduct polls are in an excellent position to determine band-wagon influence for the simple reason that the usual polling practice is to measure public opinion at several points in time. Periodic polls record the increase or decrease in any candidate’s following. To be specific: suppose that in a given election, candidate “A” is reported as having 60 per cent of the vote as against 40 per cent for candidate “B.” The band-wagon theory requires that some of candidate “B’s” followers, on learning that he is likely to be the loser, should jump on the band wagon

of candidate "A." This means, of course, that candidate "A's" following is increased to the extent of the followers who left "B," and "B's" following is decreased accordingly. The next poll, therefore, would inevitably discover that "A" had not 60 per cent of the major party vote—assuming other factors in this particular election were constant—but that he had more than 60 per cent. In short, the band-wagon theory *absolutely requires* that candidate "A's" following increase to the extent that the band-wagon influence has been present.

Since many factors enter into any single election, it would not be fair to draw conclusions based upon a single election. But if the band-wagon factor were actually important, then certainly in the case of *a great many elections* there must be evidence of this general upward trend in the case of the leading candidate's following.

That this is not the case has been demonstrated in many elections and on many issues. A review of the evidence is enlightening.

In the 1942 governorship race in New York state, Thomas E. Dewey started off with 54 per cent in the first poll. According to the band-wagon theory, he should have improved his position as it became known that he was ahead. But in six succeeding surveys the net change in Governor Dewey's vote was one per cent—and it was a *loss* of one per cent. The campaign ended with his figure at 53 per cent, and he was elected by exactly 53 per cent.

Polls conducted in the Kentucky Senatorial primary in 1938 found voters steadily falling off the band wagon of the leading candidate, Senator Barkley. He started the campaign with 65 per cent in the first poll, and his figure steadily dropped, reaching 59 per cent in the final survey shortly before election day. He was elected with 57 per cent.

In the Maryland Senatorial primary of 1938, polls found a rising trend for the leading candidate, Senator Tydings, but in the South Carolina and Georgia primaries of the same year the opposite tendency was found—a downward trend for the candi-



dates in the lead. The 1936 presidential campaign witnessed an upward trend for Roosevelt, but in 1940 the trend was upward until mid-September and downward thereafter.

On many occasions the Institute has asked voters during election campaigns (1) what candidate they thought would win, and (2) what candidate they themselves were planning to vote for. The result showed that a large proportion of people were supporting the man whom they thought would lose. In 1944, more than seven out of every ten people in the voting population thought Roosevelt would win the election, but only 54 per cent voted for him.

It could, of course, be argued that the band-wagon vote might be present in one election and not in another, or that the losing candidate would have done better if it had not been for a band-wagon psychology. Nevertheless, the weight of evidence is certainly on the side of those who contend that no positive indications exist today to prove the band wagon an important factor.

Indeed, the facts would indicate that party voters generally care far too deeply about who wins an election to vote for a given candidate just to be on the winning side.

The reason politicians hold so tenaciously to the band-wagon theory is that within the narrow limits of professional politics it undoubtedly has great importance to them. Often it is vital for a politician who seeks a job to back the right man at the right time. But the politician is likely to forget that only a negligible number of voters are directly and immediately dependent for a job upon backing the right candidate.

The cases cited above are not isolated cases. They are typical of the election results covered by the Institute during its entire history. The same type of evidence shows that there is no general tendency for winning candidates to increase their lead after poll results have been announced, nor is there any general tendency for the majority opinion on an issue to show a similar trend. A study of issues in which long-time trends have been kept by the

Institute reveals no general tendency one way or the other. The majority opinion declines as often as it increases.

## 70

“Can Congress or the government discover for itself the status of public opinion on any given issue?”

BY MEANS of “advisory referenda” the government could, if it so desired, appraise public opinion on any issue. Such advisory referenda could be undertaken either on a large scale or on a smaller or sample basis. Lee Canfield and Professor Carl J. Friedrich of Harvard University have described the Massachusetts statutory provision for taking “questions of public policy” to the voters of any district of Massachusetts, and have explained how other states might use this procedure.

In Massachusetts any question proposed for submission to the electorate of any district must first be approved and then returned with 200 signatures sixty days prior to election day. Only two such questions may appear on any given ballot. If a proposal is voted down it cannot be submitted again in fewer than three years nor can any question which is substantially the same be submitted more often than once in three years. The effect of these provisions is modified, however, by the practice of submitting the same question in adjacent districts at successive elections. Thus, different groups of Boston voters were asked regularly from 1930 through 1934 for an opinion on joining the League of Nations.

A majority vote on any proposal is not regarded as mandatory but advisory. Although there has been much debate on this point, the prevailing view in Massachusetts is that a majority of the total vote cannot bind a senator or representative in any legal

sense. All that the Public Policy Question adds up to in effect is an official public opinion poll for the information of the legislators.

While only Massachusetts makes provision in the manner just described for the "instruction" of legislators, there exists the possibility of conducting advisory referenda in many other states.

Canfield and Friedrich point out:

"Popular law-making . . . in the sense of referenda on important statutes and constitutional changes . . . was a recognized practice in colonial America.

"Thus, during the fifties and sixties, prohibition laws were passed in Iowa, Michigan, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Rhode Island, with the proviso that their coming into effect be determined by a popular vote upon some such question as 'Shall the Prohibition Act go into effect or be repealed?' Except in Vermont, these provisions were invalidated by the court on the basis of the Roman Law principle, *Delegata potestas non potest delegari* (a body acting under delegated authority cannot redelegate such authority), which had somehow worked its way into American constitutional law.

"During this period, the New York legislature dealt with the 'free school' controversy in the same way. The series of judicial opinions growing out of that action pointed the way toward an alternative procedure when the Empire State's legislators had another issue which they were reluctant to settle by themselves—union agitation against the competition of convict labor. An act of 1885 on that subject provided for a 'Do you approve of convict labor?' question on the ballot, and for making the record of returns 'available for the public information.' This purely advisory referendum for the guidance of the legislature was clearly within the limits set down in the judicial opinions referred to.

"Several of the western states also used this procedure. Nevada took the pulse of the voters on the Chinese immigration issue under a statute ordering the governor to memorialize Con-

gress and the President after he had compiled the returns on an advisory referendum. After having located and relocated the State capitol by such referenda, the California legislature at one election polled opinion on both federal and state matters: 'for the information of the President . . . and the Congress' on direct election of senators; and concerning the advisability of a literacy test for voters.

"Advisory referendum precedents can be tracked down in other states as well. A Maine statute of 1895 arranged for submission to the voters of the question, 'Is it expedient that municipal suffrage be granted to women?' When that subject came before the legislature of Massachusetts, they requested opinions from members of the Commonwealth Supreme Court upon the constitutionality of submitting a suffrage law to the people. After lengthy deliberation a majority of the justices pronounced such a procedure invalid, but their discussion went further. The justices agreed that it was as appropriate for the legislative body to canvass the views of the people on a general proposition (as against a specific statutory enactment) as it is to ask an executive officer or a departmental official for an opinion on any subject about which he may be presumed to have information of use to the lawmakers."

*The Possibility of an Advisory Referendum Conducted  
on the Basis of Sampling Procedure*

As a means of determining the views of the people of the country on any given issue and as a way to check the findings of any poll, the American Institute of Public Opinion has made the following proposal to members of Congress. Such a check, it was pointed out, could be organized quickly and could be conducted inexpensively. The basis of the proposal was as follows:

1. A bi-partisan committee of Congress, or a committee of political scientists and statisticians appointed by Congress, would take complete charge of all details.

2. Two or three communities in each of the seven major sec-

tions of the country would be selected on the basis of their representative character.

3. An advisory referendum would be held in each of these communities.

4. If it were important to know the opinion of smaller units, say of states, then two or three or more communities in each state might be sufficient to give a reasonably accurate appraisal of opinion in that state.

5. The selection of communities would be left to the Department of the Census, or any other qualified body. Care would be taken not only to make certain that both major political parties were properly represented in these communities but that all major groups in the voting population were also properly represented in the total sample from all communities.

A nationwide referendum normally takes months or even years to complete and costs millions of dollars ; an advisory referendum, the results of which should differ from the national referendum by not more than one or two per cent, could be completed in a matter of days or weeks, and need not cost more than \$50,000 to \$100,000.

## 71

“Why shouldn’t the government itself conduct polls? Why should this work be left to private organizations?”

POLLING organizations today are essentially news gathering organizations. The same reasons which can be advanced against government ownership or direction of news agencies apply with equal force to polls.

Although many convincing arguments can be raised against direct governmental supervision of polls, there are many good

reasons why various governmental agencies should conduct their own polls for *administrative purposes*. The government, no less than leading business organizations, needs to know what is right and what is wrong with its administrative policies, from the point of view of the public. By having such machinery, an administrative agency should be in a position to save many millions of dollars, and months of time in its operations. Any organization which has to deal with people, and which depends for its success upon the enlistment of the people's cooperation, cannot operate efficiently without knowing what the people think, what phases of its program are understood, what phases are misunderstood, what phases are approved, what phases are disapproved.

Because polls are an important function of management, the government will make greater use of polling procedures in the future. Even today, many government departments and agencies are making extensive use of this type of research.

## 72

“Don’t polls pervert the very nature of our government, which is a representative government?”

EVERY Congressman should obviously follow his own best judgment in deciding how to vote. He is free to follow public opinion or to ignore it if he believes the public is wrong. In a democracy, most legislators give some attention to public opinion. (We would not have a very effective democracy if government were run without reference to public opinion.) And to the extent that legislators heed public opinion, to that extent they should have an impartial and accurate appraisal of their constituents' views.

If the legislator does not agree with majority opinion, he has

an opportunity and a responsibility to try to correct the views of the public.

Two members of Congress have pioneered in recent years in the scientific study of opinion in their constituencies. Congressman Robert J. Corbett of Pennsylvania and Congressman Jacob Javits of New York have sponsored polls of their constituencies to determine the desires of the voters.

## 73

“By stressing majority opinions, do not polls tend to still the voice of those active minority groups on which mankind has relied so much in the past for its progress and advancement?”

THE chief function of public opinion polls, and their chief value, is to report the *trend* of opinion. It is the trend of opinion, consequently, which is emphasized.

Most of the ideas which have changed the course of governments, in their early stages, were held by an active minority. Eventually these ideas were accepted by the majority.

The lesson of history is that minority views often become majority opinion long before the public or its representatives realize this fact.

In this situation it is obvious that public opinion polls can be of great service in reporting the increasing acceptance of minority opinion, and by informing the public when minority opinion has reached the status of majority opinion.

“Doesn’t the very composition of Congress itself make it an accurate reflection of public opinion? After all, isn’t Congress made up of a lot of ordinary people from every part of the country—people just like you and me?”

ONLY in one respect, the distribution of population by geographical areas of the country, can Congress be regarded as a true cross section of the public. As judged on the basis of occupation, income, education, age, sex, it is obviously unrepresentative of the public at large. And what may seem strangest to the layman, Congress is seldom an accurate reflection of the political sentiments of the country.

As the sections outside the solid South tend to vote more and more alike, it is within the realm of possibility that at some future time virtually the entire membership of Congress could be made up of Democrats in an election which gave them nationally a majority of only 55 per cent to the Republicans’ 45 per cent.

A look at the record of the last few years reveals the extent to which the House of Representatives has failed to represent the true political division of the country.

In 1932, when 40 per cent of the voters of the country cast their ballots for Hoover, an analysis of the membership of the House of Representatives revealed that only 27 per cent were Republicans, whereas 73 per cent were Democrats. In 1936, when 63 per cent of the major party vote of the country was cast for Roosevelt, the composition of the House was as follows: 79 per cent Democratic, 21 per cent Republican. In 1940, with 45 per cent of the votes given to the two major parties cast for the



Republican candidate, Wendell Willkie, only 38 per cent of the membership of the House was Republican. In 1944 the correlation was closer: with 54 per cent of the major party vote going to Roosevelt, the Democrats won approximately the same proportion (56 per cent) of the seats in the House.

The Senate, because of the longer tenure of office, is obviously even less representative of the political divisions of the country at any given time.

## 75

“What about letters to Congressmen—aren’t they a good index to public opinion?”

LETTERS received by Congressmen invariably represent the “articulate minority.” On few issues in recent years could the views of those people who write to their Congressmen be regarded as representative. In fact, they are much more likely to represent people who have an “ax to grind,” or they may be the product of the organizing genius of a “pressure group.”

# Measurement of the Intensity of Opinion

76

“To what extent can intensity of feeling be measured? Can we say we know anything about public opinion until polls tell us about the eagerness of those who want something done and about the indifference or bitterness of those who do not want it to be done?”

To *PROVIDE* a complete description of public opinion, full account must be taken of the intensity of feeling—the degree of conviction—with which segments of the population hold certain of their views.

Although the perfect measure of intensity has yet to be devised, there are today several simple and practical ways of finding out how deeply people feel about a given issue.

A careful examination of polling experience in recent years points to the fact that the importance of the intensity factor can easily be overrated. So likewise the difficulties of measuring the intensity of opinion can be exaggerated.

First of all, it is obvious that persons who know little or nothing about an issue are unlikely to feel very deeply about it. John Smith, typical voter, can't be expected to be rabidly for or against a proposal to change the tax laws regarding corporations if he knows nothing about the proposal.

And even if Mr. Smith should have some knowledge of the proposal, his interest in it, his feeling about it, is not likely to be great if he has given no thought to the proposal—at least to the extent of knowing the arguments pro and con.

By means of “filter” questions, Mr. Smith can be given tests which will quickly and objectively determine whether he knows anything about the proposal, and whether his thinking has gone far enough to enable him to cite the reasons for or against it.

If Mr. Smith passes both of these tests he has some knowledge of the issue and at least some measure of interest in it and, from this point on, means can be employed to measure the degree of his feeling about it.

The interviewer can question Mr. Smith on any of the following points:

1. Does Mr. Smith, taking him at his own word, feel very strongly, or only mildly, about the issue?
2. How certain is he that his view is the right one?
3. How much does it mean to him that his view prevail?
4. What is he willing to do or to sacrifice to see that his view is carried into action? Is he willing to take his time, to spend his money to educate others?
5. How long has he held the same view? Did he arrive at it only today, or has he had the same opinion for some time?

If this catechism doesn't reveal just how strongly Mr. Smith feels about the issue in question, the interviewer can make use either of a graphic rating scale or an attitude scale.

In the 1940 election the Institute used a picture of a thermometer, scaled from 0 to 100, to measure the degree of enthusiasm on the part of Roosevelt and Willkie followers for their candidates. The same type of scale was used to measure the degree of voting determination on the part of each of these two groups. Phrases descriptive of various degrees of enthusiasm, or determination, were placed opposite numbers on the thermometer to make the scale readily understandable to persons in-

interviewed. The degree of interest expressed by each phrase was predetermined by tests on typical voters.

Attitude scales permit the Mr. Smiths an opportunity to select one of many statements which best fits their own opinion. Since the statements cover a range from one extreme to the other, they can be said to measure intensity. Professor Louis Guttman of Cornell has conducted intensive work on attitude scaling, summarizing his results in an article "A Basis for Scaling Qualitative Data" in the *American Sociological Review* (1944, Vol. 9). Professor Hadley Cantril of Princeton is the author of a useful paper "The Intensity of an Attitude" in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* (1946, Vol. 41).

In the 1944 election campaign the Institute tested the following attitude scale which is similar to those used in the *Fortune* survey.

1. I would not consider voting for anyone but Roosevelt.
2. While Roosevelt has made some mistakes, I am sure he would be better than anyone the Republicans would nominate.
3. While I like many of the things that Roosevelt has done as President, particularly his war efforts, I think it is time to elect a Republican.
4. I would not consider voting for anyone but a Republican.

After careful tests of these various ways of measuring intensity of opinion, Hadley Cantril came to the following conclusions, as stated in *Gauging Public Opinion*:

"1. A knowledge of the intensity of an opinion as well as its direction is necessary for both accurate understanding and prediction.

"2. The intensity of opinion can be measured. In spite of the theoretical difficulties in conceptualizing the dimension of intensity, in actual practice the various instruments devised to gauge intensity all seem to be tapping essentially the same dimension.

"3. The best methods to gauge intensity of opinion found in these studies are (a) individual rating on sureness of opinion, and (b) self-rating on a graphic, thermometer device.

"4. Other devices that have proved their usefulness in measuring intensity are: self-rating on the strength of conviction; interviewer's rating of strength of feeling; and an attitude scale if it is carefully constructed with reference to the particular problem at hand."

The problem of measuring the intensity of opinion will be solved by further study and experimentation, just as problems of extensity have been solved. And not to be overlooked is the fact that, even at the present time, it is possible to give a fairly accurate appraisal of this factor.

# Miscellaneous Problems of Public Opinion

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## “Who pays for the polls?”

THE entire cost of operation of the American Institute of Public Opinion is paid for by a group of approximately 125 leading American daily newspapers, whose cooperative support makes the Institute's continuous polling possible. The newspapers have exclusive publication rights in their communities to the poll findings. These newspapers represent all shades of political belief—Republican, Democratic, and Independent.

Polls directed by Elmo Roper for *Fortune* are, of course, paid for by this publication. Election surveys conducted by Archibald Crossley have been paid for by the newspapers in which the results appeared.

The National Opinion Research Center is supported by the University of Chicago and the Marshall Field Foundation and by income from special surveys.

In addition to organizations conducting national polls of opinion, there are a number of statewide polls supported by leading newspapers. These include the Iowa Poll, sponsored by the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*; the Minnesota Poll, sponsored by the *Minneapolis Star-Journal*; the Massachusetts Poll, sponsored by the *Boston Globe*; the Texas Poll, sponsored by a group of Texas newspapers; the California Poll and the New Jersey Poll, each supported by newspapers in their respective states. A number of citywide polls are conducted regularly, the best known being the Philadelphia Poll of the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the Washington Post Poll sponsored by the *Washington Post*, whose chairman, Mr. Eugene Meyer, was one of the

first newspaper publishers in America to support modern public opinion polling.

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### “Do polls conducted by different organizations show the same results?”

Polls show the same results *only* when these conditions are met: (1) when they sample the same type of cross section; (2) when they use the same procedure; (3) when they are made at the same time.

Since any survey of public opinion is likely to be called a poll, and is likely to be interpreted as a nationwide study of public opinion, much confusion is certain to arise because these various studies do not produce the same results. For example, a magazine sends out a mail questionnaire to a selected list of its readers and, on the basis of its results, claims to show what the people of the country think on the issues covered.

In this instance, the cross section is not an accurate cross section of all the people of the country nor even of the readership of the magazine. A mail questionnaire is never returned by every person who receives it, and the sample is distorted accordingly. Moreover, because of early closing dates on the magazine, the results represent sentiment, not at the time of publication, but at the time when the readers actually filled out the questionnaire.

Comparisons, therefore, can and should be made only when factors of cross section, procedure, and time are taken fully into account. When independent polling organizations poll under similar circumstances they invariably produce virtually the same results.

During recent years the National Opinion Research Center (located at the University of Chicago), the Princeton Public Opinion Research Project, and the American Institute of Public

Opinion have had occasion to check results on scores of issues. The results have seldom varied by more than two or three per cent, despite the fact that the size of the sample employed by these organizations often varies considerably.

The polls undertaken by *Fortune* under the direction of Elmo Roper ordinarily represent the views of the entire adult population. Such a sample includes a full representation of Negroes of the South and nonvoting whites. Polls of the American Institute of Public Opinion usually are based upon samples of the voting population of the United States. Except on questions involving social issues, nonvoting groups in the South and elsewhere are excluded. In comparing *Fortune* and Institute polls the time factor must also be taken into account.

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### “Why shouldn’t all polling be done by universities, or quasi-public institutions?”

THE universities are taking more and more interest in problems of public opinion, and it is certain that within the next few years the work of these institutions will assume greater importance.

Headquarters of the National Opinion Research Center are at the University of Chicago, with an office also at the University of Denver. The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has a survey division headed by Dr. Rensis Likert. The Washington Public Opinion Laboratory was established jointly in 1947 by the University of Washington and the State College of Washington. Supported by grants from the Legislature, it is being directed by Stuart C. Dodd and Tolbert H. Kennedy. Public opinion research is being carried on at Harvard University under the direction of Samuel A. Stouffer and Jerome S. Bruner.



The Rockefeller Foundation, through a grant to Princeton University, established the Princeton Office of Public Opinion Research for studying polling procedures and polling results. Dr. Hadley Cantril is its director. The Statistical Laboratory of Iowa State College at Ames, Iowa, deserves special credit for its pioneering work in area sampling.

This list is by no means complete; other academic institutions are concerning themselves with public opinion measurement. The next few years will undoubtedly see the establishment of new survey divisions in the universities for practical field testing of theories and techniques.

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“Are the files of polling organizations available for research purposes?”

THE Princeton Office of Public Opinion Research keeps a complete record of all the polls of the American Institute of Public Opinion, for study and reference purposes. In these files will be found a wealth of social data accumulated since 1935. A recapitulation of the results of both Institute and *Fortune* polls is published in each issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

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“Won’t the time come when the public is polled to death?”

EVEN when the government, business, and educational institutions are fully aware of the practical value to them of modern polling procedures—and add their host of interviewers to those

already at work for polling organizations—Mr. John Doe, average citizen, is still going to complain: "Why have I never been interviewed?"

The reason, as stated earlier, is to be found in America's vast population. If all these organizations together were to poll 100,000 persons per week, it would still take fifteen years to get around once to all the adults of the country. So, for many years to come, the chief complaint will not be from those who have been questioned too often but from those who would like to see just one interviewer in the flesh!

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"Obviously there is good research and bad research. Won't the attention now being given to polling attract a lot of persons, some of whom are likely to be incompetent?"

IN EVERY field there are competent and incompetent practitioners. The field of public opinion research, as it develops, will prove no exception. The danger, of course, is that the public, having few standards by which to judge the quality of research or the competence of its practitioners, will fail to distinguish between the good and the bad.

The field of commercial research provides an interesting parallel. While the level of ability of the men who have entered this new field is high, and while a great deal of valuable research has been done—as the amazing growth of this new field attests—this should not obscure the fact that some poor research is accepted as good research.

The question of standards of practice in research is receiving

attention from an association created by members of the profession at a conference at Williamstown, Massachusetts, in September 1947. The American Association for Public Opinion Research also acts as a clearinghouse for information concerning the opinion research industry. Its headquarters are at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N.Y.

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“Suppose that some unscrupulous polling organization should enter the field. Is there any way by which the public could discover this fact?”

Most mistakes made in polling public opinion in future years will be traceable to lack of experience and ability on the part of those directing the work, and not to dishonesty.

Should an unscrupulous organization enter the field and report falsified results it would find itself in the position of having to defend its findings which would be at variance with those of other polling organizations. If the poll findings were trumped up for an election, then the election results would reveal the extent of the manipulation.

In time, the field of public opinion research will be self-policed by the organizations and the universities interested in this work. The American Association for Public Opinion Research, created in 1947, has as one of its objectives the monitoring of research practice.

# Polling in Foreign Countries

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“Is extensive polling going on in foreign countries?”

YES. At this writing, public opinion polling is being carried on with varying degrees of regularity in at least 18 countries besides the United States. These include England, France, Holland, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Hungary, Germany (American zone), South Africa, Canada, Australia, Brazil, and Mexico. In addition, market-research operations are carried on in Cuba, Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Colombia.

Poll-taking organizations in 11 countries have become affiliated with the American Institute of Public Opinion, and at a conference in England in May 1947 the International Association of Public Opinion (Gallup) Institutes was organized. Its members conduct joint polls once a month on a question agreed upon in advance. The results are published simultaneously in the participating countries and in the publication *Surveys of World Opinion*, issued quarterly by the American Institute. In addition to initiating international polling, the members exchange research knowledge, compare techniques, and conduct joint experiments to test new methods. The majority of the members receive support from newspapers and other publications in their respective countries and from income derived from market research. The Gallup affiliates, as of 1948, are listed on the following page.

## GALLUP AFFILIATES

British Institute of Public Opinion Aldwych House London, England <i>Director:</i> Henry Durant	Norsk Gallup Institutt Akersgaten 49 Oslo, Norway <i>Director:</i> B. Balstad
Institut Français d'Opinion Publique 16 Rue de Monceau Paris 8, France <i>Directors:</i> Alfred Max, Jean Stoetzel, Henri Paoletti, Noel Pouderoux	Suomen Gallup O/Y Mikaelsgaten 9A Helsinki, Finland <i>Director:</i> A. Raula
Nederlandsch Instituut voor de Publieke Opinie Singel 90, P.O. Box 104 Amsterdam, Holland <i>Directors:</i> Jan Stapel, W. J. de Jonge	Italian Institute of Public Opinion (DOXA) Piazza E. Duse 4 Milan, Italy <i>Director:</i> P. Luzzatto-Fegiz
Svenska Gallup Institutet Kingsgatan 48 Stockholm, Sweden <i>Director:</i> Sven Blomquist	Canadian Institute of Public Opinion 38 King St., West Toronto, Canada <i>Director:</i> Wilfrid Sanders
Dansk Gallup Institut Dr. Tvargade 29 Copenhagen, Denmark <i>Director:</i> Chr. D. Reventlow	Australian Public Opinion Polls 352 Collins St. Melbourne, Australia <i>Director:</i> Roy Morgan
(General director of Scandinavian Institutes: Wahl Asmussen, Nr. Farimagagade, Copenhagen)	Instituto Brasileiro de Opiniao Publica e Estatistica Rua Mexico, 11, 18 Andar, Grupe 1802 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil <i>Director:</i> Auricelio Penteado

In September 1947, at an international conference on public opinion research at Williamstown, Massachusetts, a World Congress of Public Opinion was formed, with Dr. Jean Stoetzel of the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique as first president.

## “Are the problems of polling in other countries very different?”

WHEN poll-taking was first being organized in such countries as France and Holland, objections were raised that the French peasants or the Dutch peasants would never talk openly to interviewers about their opinions. Similar doubts were expressed in other countries about still other groups. But experience has demonstrated that such fears were groundless. When skillful interviewing techniques are used, all population groups will co-operate in being polled.

Each nation has its own peculiar sampling problems, the make-up of voting populations differs, and census and election data are by no means uniform. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, polls in widely separated countries have achieved a high uniformity of accuracy. Eight of the overseas affiliates of the American Institute of Public Opinion had, up to January 1948, forecast 54 elections with an average error of only 3.6 percentage points—a record equal to the average of the American Institute of Public Opinion in forecasting 197 elections up to the same date. One of the most accurate election forecasts in the history of polling was that made by Svenska Gallup Institutet prior to the Swedish elections in September 1944. With five major political parties running, and several minor parties, the forecast showed an average error of only 0.3 per cent.

Another highly accurate forecast was that made by the British Institute of Public Opinion in July 1945, which showed that the Churchill government would be defeated and the Labor Party take over power—a situation which few political experts expected. The average error of the prediction for all parties was 1.0 per cent.

Dr. Henry Durant, director of the British Institute of Public

Opinion, contributes the following description of the polling situation, and polling problems, in England:

"I am asked to comment on the questions and answers in the foregoing pages of this book, to amplify them so that they fit the British scene more accurately. Reading them through with considerable care in London, my main reflection—making allowances for the American setting—is how relevant the questions sound here and how much the answers resemble what we ourselves would say in reply.

"At a recent international conference of Gallup affiliates at Loxwood Hall, it was noticeable how, when opinion researchers from more than a dozen countries pooled their experiences, there was little that was unique in any of them. Science has a universal application in the field of social studies as well as in the realm of physical phenomena.

"Elaborating a few of the points from the British angle: we are the only country in which the Institute's findings are published in one newspaper—the *News Chronicle*. The explanation lies in the fact that Great Britain is the one country which is completely covered by a national press—papers published in London are read at the breakfast table of practically every part of England, Scotland, and Wales. Accordingly, publication in one national paper covers every area.

"Stress should be laid on the willingness with which the public responds, in the vast majority of instances, to being interviewed. When we started, in 1936, we were assured that the public might answer in the United States but never in Britain. When they answered readily in London, we were told that they wouldn't in the provinces. No differences have been found in any part of the country. Personal experience has shown, in fact, that there are no perceptible differences in the public's reactions to being interviewed in Britain, the United States, or Canada. They all like it.

"Connected with the public's willingness is the seriousness with which people answer the questioning. If critics of the polls

were to spend a day in the field, contacting the public, many of the doubts and difficulties which they think up in the seclusion of their study would evaporate. They would find that serious thought is given to the answers, that it is no uncommon experience to have the person contacted go away and then take the trouble to seek the interviewer once more to say that he would like to expand an answer.

"As with all Gallup Institutes, we use part-time interviewers. Much criticism has been levelled at us on this ground. Perhaps the best answer is that all research organizations are now turning to part-time interviewers. The problem of part-time versus full-time interviewers is too technical to discuss here, but experience suggests that for opinion work the balance of advantages lies with part-timers and not the other way round.

"Britain has seen a great development of opinion research and consumer research of all kinds during the past decade. The government now has its own research unit, headed by Mr. Louis Moss. The BBC has a large Listener Research Section for the home programs, directed by Mr. Robert Silvey. Mr. Asher Lee handles the BBC's overseas research.

"Among other colleges, the London School of Economics is now actively interested in surveys and is cooperating with research organizations in getting work done."





